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El Dorado is a planet with a problem:
the men are infertile—and the ladies
are getting out of hand

A Science-Fiction Novel

by A. Bertram Chandler

to prime the pump

AN ORIGINAL NOVEL



TO PRIME THE PUMP

A. Bertram Chandler

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THE GIRL LAY SPREAD-EAGLED ON THE ALTAR . . .

"The white goat!" they shouted . . . "The goat without horns . . ."

Two men set the animal down on the girl's naked body, its back to her breasts and belly, its head between her legs. The drums throbbed softly, insistently. The priest's knife swept down; the animal's cries ceased in mid-bleat, although its now released limbs kicked spasmodically. The girl, free herself from restraining hands, held the dying body to her.

Chapter 1

Grimes—Lieutenant John Grimes, Federation Survey Service, to give him his full name and title—had the watch. Slowly, careful not to break the contact of the magnetized soles of his shoes with the deck, he shuffled backwards and forwards in the narrow confines of the control room. Captain Daintree, commanding officer of the cruiser *Aries*, was a martinet, and one of the many things that he would not tolerate was a watchkeeper spending his spell of duty lounging in an acceleration chair, not even in (as now) Free Fall conditions. Not that Grimes really minded. He was a young and vigorous man and still not used to the enforced inactivity that is an inescapable part of spacefaring. This regulation pacing was exercise of a sort, was better than nothing.

He was a stocky young man, this Grimes, and the stiff material of his uniform shirt did little to hide the muscular development of his body. His face was too craggy for conventional handsomeness, but women, he already had learned, considered him good-looking enough. On the rare occasions that he thought about it he admitted that he was not dissatisfied with his overall appearance, even his protuberant ears had their uses, having more than once served as convenient handles by which his face could be pulled down to a waiting and expectant female face below. To complete the inventory, his close-cropped hair was darkly brown and his eyes, startlingly pale in his space-tanned face, were gray, at times a very bleak gray.

So this was Lieutenant John Grimes, presently officer-of-the-watch of the Survey Service cruiser *Aries*, slowly shuffling back and forth between the consoles, the banked instruments, alert for any information that might suddenly be displayed on dials or screens. He was not expecting any; the ship was in deep space, failing free through the warped continuum induced by her Mannschenn Drive through regions well clear of the heavily frequented trade routes. There was only one human colony, Grimes knew, in this sector of the Galaxy, the world that had been named, not very originally but aptly, *El Dorado*; and two ships a standard year served the needs of that fabulous planet.

El Dorado . . .

Idly—but a watch officer has to think about something—Grimes wondered what it was really like there. There were stories, of course, but they were no more than rumors, exaggerated rumors, like as not. The El Doradans did not encourage visitors, and the two ships that handled their small trade—precious ores outwards, luxury goods

inwards—were owned and manned by themselves, not that the vessels, space-borne miracles of automation, required more than two men, captain and engineer, apiece.

Grimes looked out through the viewports, roughly to where El Dorado should be. He did not see it, of course, nor did he expect to do so. He saw only warped Space, suns near and far that had been twisted to the semblance of pulsating, multicolored spirals, blackness between the suns that had been contorted into its own vast convolutions, sensed (but with what sense?) rather than seen. It was, as always, a fascinating spectacle; it was, as always, a frightening one. It was not good to look at it for too long.

Grimes turned his attention to the orderly universe in miniature displayed in the chart tank.

"Mr. Grimes!"

"Sir!" The Lieutenant started. He hadn't heard the old bastard come into the control room. He looked up to the tall, spare figure of Captain Daintree, to the cold blue eyes under the mane of white hair. "Sir?"

"Warn the engine room that we shall be requiring Inertial Drive shortly. And then, I believe that you're qualified in navigation, you may work out the trajectory for El Dorado."

Chapter 2

Lieutenant Commander Cooper, the Navigating Officer of *Aries*, was in a bad mood, a sulky expression on his plump, swarthy face, his reedy voice petulant. "Damn it all," he was saying. "Damn it all, what am *I* supposed to be here for? An emergency alteration of trajectory comes up and am I called for? Oh, no, that'd be far too simple. So young Grimes has to fumble his way through the sums that *I* should be doing, and the first that *I* know is when somebody condescends to sound the acceleration alarm . . ."

"Was there anything wrong with my trajectory, *sir*?" asked Grimes coldly.

"No, Mr. Grimes. Nothing at all wrong, although *I* was brought up to adhere to the principle that interstellar dust clouds should be avoided . . ."

"With the Mannschenn Drive in operation there's no risk."

"Isn't there? A little knowledge is a dangerous thing, Mr. Grimes. Inside some of these dark nebulae the Continuum is dangerously warped."

"But CCD736 can hardly be classed as a nebula . . ."

"Even so, the first principle of all navigation should be caution, and it's high time that you learned that."

Doctor Passifern, the Senior Medical Officer, broke in. "Come off it, Pilot. Young Grimes *is* learning, and this idea of the Old Man's that every officer in the ship should be able to take over from the specialists is a very sound one . . ."

"Ha! It might be an idea if some of us were encouraged to take over *your* job, Doc!"

A flush darkened Passifern's already ruddy face. He growled, "That's not the same and you know it."

"Isn't it? Oh, I know that ever since the dawn of history you pill peddlers have made a sacred mystery of your technology . . ."

Grimes got to his feet, said, "What about some more coffee?" He collected the three mugs from the table, walked to the espresso machine that stood in a corner of the comfortable wardroom. He found it rather embarrassing when his seniors quarreled—the long-standing feud between the Navigator and the Doctor was more than good-natured bickering—and thought that a pause for refreshment would bring the opportunity for a change of subject. As he filled the mugs he remarked brightly, "At least this acceleration allows us to enjoy our drinks. I hate having to sip out of a bulb."

"Do you?" asked Cooper nastily. "I'd have thought that one of your

tender years would enjoy a regression to the well-remembered and well-beloved feeding bottle."

Grimes ignored this. He set the mugs down on the low table, then dropped ungracefully into his easy chair. He said to Passifern, "But what is the hurry, Doc? I know that I'm only the small boy around here and that I'm not supposed to be told anything, but would you be breaking any vows of secrecy if you told us the nature of the emergency on El Dorado?"

"I don't know myself, Grimes. All I know is that there shouldn't be one. Those filthy rich El Doradans have the finest practitioners and specialists in the known Universe in residence; and they, by this time, must be almost as filthy rich as their patients! All *I* know is that *they* knew that we were in the vicinity of their planet, and requested a second opinion on something or other . . ."

"And our Lord and Master," contributed Cooper, "decided that it was a good excuse to give the Inertial Drive a gallop. He doesn't like Free Fall." He obliged with a surprisingly good imitation of Captain Daintree's deep voice: "Too much Free Fall makes officers soft."

"He could be right," said Passifern.

Cooper ignored this. "What puzzles me," he said, "is why these outstanding practitioners and specialists should call in a humble ship's quack . . ."

"As a major vessel of the Survey Service," Passifern told him coldly, "we carry a highly qualified and expert team of physicians, surgeons and technicians. And our hospital and research facilities would be the envy of many a planet. Furthermore, *we* have the benefit of experience denied to any planet-bound doctor . . ."

"And wouldn't *you* just love to be planetbound on a world like El Dorado?" asked Cooper.

Before the Doctor could make an angry reply, Grimes turned to the Navigator. "And what *is* El Dorado like, sir? I was going to look it up, but the Old Man's taken the Pilot Book covering it out of the control room."

"Doing his homework," said Cooper. "Luckily it's not everybody who has to rush to the books when the necessity for an unscheduled landing crops up. We specialists, unlike the jacks-of-all-trades, tend to be reasonably expert in our own fields." He took a noisy gulp of coffee. "All right. El Dorado. An essentially Earth-type planet in orbit about a Sol-type primary. A very ordinary sort of world, you might say. But it's not. And it wasn't."

It was Passifern who broke the silence. "What's so different about it?"

"Don't you know, Doc? You were hankering for its fleshpots only a

minute ago. I suppose you have some sort of idea of what it's like now, but not how it got that way. Well, to begin with, it was an extraordinary world. It was one of those planets upon which life—life-as-we-know-it or any other kind of life—had never taken hold. There it was, for millions upon millions of years, just a sterile ball of rock and mud and water.

"And then it was purchased from the Federation by the so-called El Dorado Corporation.

"Even you, young Grimes, must know something of history. Even you must know how, on world after world, the trend has been towards socialism. Some societies have gone the whole hog, preaching and practicing the Gospel According to St. Marx. Some have contented themselves with State control of the means of production and supply, with ruinous taxation of the very well-to-do thrown in. There have been levelling up processes and levelling down processes, and these have hurt the aristocracies of birth and breeding as much as they have hurt the aristocracies of Big Business and industry.

"And so the Corporation was formed. Somehow its members managed to get most of their wealth out of their home worlds, and much of it was used for the terraforming of El Dorado. Terraforming? Landscape gardening would be a better phrase. Yes, that world's no more, and no less, than a huge, beautiful park, with KEEP OFF THE GRASS signs posted insofar as the common herd is concerned."

"What about servants? Technicians?" asked Grimes.

"The answer to that problem, my boy, was automation, automation and still more automation. Automation to an extent that would not have been practical on a world where the economics of it had to be considered. And on the rare occasions that the machines do need attention there are a few El Doradans to whom mechanics, electronics and the like are amusing and quite fascinating hobbies. And there will be others, of course, who enjoy playing around at gardening, or even farming."

"A world, in fact, that's just a rich man's toy," said Grimes.

"And don't forget the rich bitches," Cooper told him.

"I don't think I'd like it," went on Grimes.

"And I don't think that the El Doradans would like you," Cooper remarked. "Or any of us. As far as they're concerned, we're just snotty-nosed ragamuffins from the wrong side of the tracks."

"Still," said Passifern smugly, "they requested *my* services."

"God knows why," sneered Cooper.

There was silence while the Doctor tried to think of a scathing rejoinder. It was broken by Grimes. "Ah, here's Mr. Bose. Perhaps he can tell us."

"Our commissioned teacup reader," grunted the Navigator sardonically. "Singing and dancing."

Mr. Bose, the cruiser's Psionic Radio Officer, did not look the sort of man who would ever be heard or seen indulging in such activities. He was short and fat, and the expression of his shiny, chocolate-colored face was one of unrelieved gloom. On the occasions when a shipmate would tell him, for the love of all the odd gods of the Galaxy, to cheer up, he would reply portentously, "But I *know* too much." What he knew of what went on in the minds of his shipmates he would never divulge; insofar as they were concerned, he always observed and respected the oath of secrecy taken by all graduates of the Rhine Institute. Now and again, however, he seemed to consider outsiders fair game and would pass on to his fellow officers what he had learned by telepathic eavesdropping.

"What cooks on El Dorado, Bosey Boy?" demanded Cooper.

"What cooks, Commander, sir? The flesh of animals. They are a godless people and partake of unclean foods."

"The same as we do, in this ship. But you know what I mean."

Surprisingly, the telepath laughed, a high-pitched giggle. "Yes, I know what you mean, Commander, sir."

"Of course you do, you damned snooper. But what cooks?"

"I . . . I cannot understand. I have tried to . . . to tune in on the thoughts of all the people. From their Psionic Radio officers I have learned nothing, nothing at all. They are experts, highly trained, with their minds impenetrably screened. But the dreams, the secret thoughts of the ordinary people are vague, confused. There is unease and there is fear, but it is not the fear of an immediate danger. But it is a very real fear . . ."

"Probably just an increasing incidence of tinea," laughed Cooper. "Right up your alley, Doc."

Passifern was not amused.

Chapter 3

Aries was in orbit about El Dorado. It was very quiet in the control room where Captain Daintree and his officers looked out, through the wide viewports, to the green, blue and golden, cloud-girdled planet that the ship was circling. The absence of the familiar, shipboard noises—the thin, high keening of the Mannschenn Drive, the odd, irregular throbbing of the inertial drive—engendered a feeling of tension, a taut expectancy. And this was more than just a routine planetfall. El Dorado was a new world to all of *Aries'* people. True, they had landed on new worlds before, worlds upon which they had been the first humans to set foot; but this fabled planet was—different. Grimes thought of the Moslem paradise with its timeless *houris* and grinned wryly. Such beauties would never confer their favours on—how had Cooper put it?—on a snotty-nosed ragamuffin from the wrong side of the tracks.

"And what do you find so amusing, Mr. Grimes?" asked Daintree coldly. "Perhaps you will share the joke with us."

"I . . . I was thinking, sir." Grimes felt his prominent ears redden.

"You aren't paid to think," came the age-old, automatic reply, the illogical rejoinder that has persisted through millennia. Grimes was tempted to point out that officers *are* paid to think, but thought better of it.

Commander Griffin, the Executive Officer, broke the silence. "The pinnacle is all cleared away, sir, for the advance party."

"The *pinnacle*, Commander? By whose orders?"

"I . . . I thought, sir . . ."

Another one! Grimes chuckled inwardly, permitted himself a slight grin as he looked at the embarrassed Griffin. Griffin looked back at him in a way that boded ill for the Lieutenant.

Daintree said, "I admit, Commander, that you are permitted to think. Even so, you should think to more purpose. How long is it since the rocket re-entry boat was exercised? Did you not consider that this would be an ideal opportunity to give the craft a test and training flight?"

"Why, yes, sir. It would be an ideal opportunity."

"Then have it cleared away, Commander. At once. Oh, which of your young gentlemen are you thinking of sending?"

"Doctor Passifern has arranged for Surgeon Lieutenant Kravisky to go with the advance party, sir."

"Never mind that. Who will be the pilot?"

"Er . . . Mr. Grimes, sir."

"Mr. Grimes." The captain switched his attention from the Commander to the Lieutenant. "Mr. Grimes, what experience have you had in the handling of rocket-powered craft?"

"At the Academy, sir. And during my first training cruise."

"And never since. You're like all the rest of the officers aboard this ship, far too used to riding around in comfort with an inertial drive unit tucked away under your backside. Very well, this will be an ideal opportunity for you to gain some experience of *real* spacefaring."

"Yes, sir. See to the boat, sir?"

"Not yet. Commander Griffin is quite capable of that." He walked to the chart desk, beckoned Grimes to follow him. The Navigator had already spread a chart on the flat surface, securing it with spring clips. "This," said Daintree, "was transmitted to us by whatever or whoever passes for Port Control on El Dorado. Mercator's Projection. Here is the spaceport"—his thin, bony fingers jabbed downwards—"by this lake . . ."

"Will the spaceport be suitable for the landing of the rocket boat, sir?" asked Grimes. "After all, if it was designed only to handle inertial drive vessels . . ."

"I've already thought of that point, Mr. Grimes. But our rocket boat is designed to land on water if needs be."

"But . . . but will they be ready for us, sir?"

"This vessel has established electronic radio communication with El Dorado, Mr. Grimes. I shall tell them to be ready for you. After all, we are visiting their planet at their request."

"Yes, sir."

"Very good, then. You may study the chart until it is time for you to take the boat away."

"Yes, sir."

Grimes looked down at the new, as yet unmarked plan of the spaceport and its environs. He would far sooner have spent the time studying the Manual of Spacemanship, with special attention to that section devoted to the handling of rocket-powered re-entry vehicles. But, after all, he was qualified as an atmosphere pilot and had, for some time, been drawing the extra pay to which his certificate entitled him.

As he studied the chart he overheard Captain Daintree talking over the transceiver to somebody, presumably Port Control, on the planet below. "Yes, you heard me correctly. I am sending the advance party down in one of my rocket boats." Came the reply, "But, Captain, our spaceport is not suitable for the reception of such a craft." The voice was as arrogant as Daintree's own but in a different way. It was the arrogance that comes with money (too much money), with

inherited titles, with a bloodline traced back to some uncouth robber baron who happened to be a more efficient thief and murderer than his rivals.

"I am sending away my rocket boat." One almost expected the acridity of ozone to accompany that quarterdeck snap and crackle.

"I am sorry, Captain—" Port Control didn't sound very sorry—"but that is impossible."

"Do you want our help, or don't you?"

There was a brief silence, then a reluctant "Yes."

"Your spaceport is on the northern shore of Lake Bluewater, isn't it?"

"You have the chart that we transmitted to you, Captain."

"My rocket boat can be put down on water."

"You don't understand, Captain. Lake Bluewater is a very popular resort."

"Isn't that just too bad? Get your kids with their pails and shovels and plastic animals off the beaches and out of the water."

Again the silence and then in a voice that shed none of its cold venom over the thousands of miles, "Very well, Captain. But please understand that we shall not be responsible for any accidents to your boat and your personnel."

"And I," said Daintree harshly, "refuse to accept responsibility for any picnic or paddling parties who happen to get in the way. The officer in charge of the re-entry vehicle will be using the same frequency as we are using now. He will keep you and me informed of his movements. Over."

"Roger," came the supercilious reply. "Roger. Over and standing by."

"Rocket boat cleared away and ready, sir," said Commander Griffin, who had returned to the control room.

"Very good, Commander. Man and launch. Mr. Grimes, you should have memorized that chart by now, and, in any case, there will be another copy in the boat."

"Yes, sir." Grimes followed the Commander from the control room.

* * *

Surgeon Lieutenant Kravisky, his slender body already pressure-suited, his thin, dark face behind the open face plate of his helmet wearing an anxious expression, was already waiting by the boat blister. In each hand he carried a briefcase: one containing ship's papers and the other his uniform. Disgustedly, Grimes stripped to his briefs. If he'd been allowed to take the pinnace instead of this relic from the bad old days, there would have been no need to dress up like

a refugee from historical space opera. A rating helped him into his suit, another man neatly folded his shorts and shirt and stowed them, together with his shoes and stockings, into a small case. Being on the Advance Party had its advantages after all, Grimes decided. At least he would be spared the discomfort of full dress— frock coat, cocked hat and sword—which would be rig of the day when the big ship came in.

"Are you sure that you can drive this thing, John?" asked Kravisky.

"I don't know. I've never tried before." Then, before Commander Griffin could issue a scathing reprimand, he added. "Not this particular one, I mean. But I am qualified."

"That will do, Mr. Grimes," said Griffin. "You know the drill, I hope. After you're down, present yourself to Port Control and make the necessary arrangements for the reception of *Aries*. Don't forget that *you* represent the ship. Comport yourself accordingly. And try to refrain from misguided attempts at humor."

"Ay, ay, sir."

"Then board the boat. Procedure as per Regulations. Bo's'n!"

"Sir!" snapped the petty officer.

"Carry on!"

"Ay, ay, sir."

The inner door to the blister opened, revealing a small airlock. Grimes entered it first, followed by Kravisky, snapping shut his faceplate as he did so. He heard the sighing of the pumps as the air was exhausted from the chamber, watched the needle of the pressure dial drop to Zero. The red light came on. The outer door opened.

Beyond it was the graceless form of the rocket boat, a stubby, flattened dart with a venturi and control surfaces; and visible beyond it was black, star-flecked sky and a great, glowing arc that was the limb of El Dorado. Grimes shuffled toward it on his magnetized soles, saw that the cabin door was already open, pulled himself into the vehicle. Then, while Kravisky was stowing the cases in a locker abaft the seats, he pushed the button that shut the door and another that pressurized the compartment. He looked at the dials and meters on the console, saw that the firing chamber had been warmed up and that all was ready for the launch. He strapped himself into his seat and waited until the Surgeon Lieutenant had done likewise. He opened the faceplate of his helmet. The air was breathable enough but carried a stale, canned flavor.

"All systems *Go!*" he said, feeling that the archaic spacemanese matched the archaic means of transportation.

"What was that?" snapped Griffin's voice from the speaker. Then, tiredly, "Oh, all right, Mr. Grimes. Five second count-down.

Five . . . four . . . three . . . two . . . one . . . *fire!*"

Smoothly and efficiently the launching catapult threw the rocket boat away and clear from the cruiser. Not very smoothly, but efficiently enough, Grimes actuated the reaction drive, felt the giant hand of acceleration push him back into the padding of his seat.

"Mr. Grimes!" This time it was Captain Daintree's voice that came from the speaker. "Mr. Grimes, you should have been able to fall free all the way to the exosphere. You have no fuel to waste on astrobatatics."

"Bloody back-seat drivers!" muttered Grimes, but he held his hand over the microphone as he did so.

Chapter 4

Nonetheless he was having his fun, was young Mr. Grimes.

Once he had the feel of his unhandy craft, once he stopped resenting having to worry about such matters as skin temperature, angle of attack, drag, and the rest of the aeronautical esoterica, he began to enjoy himself, to thrill to the sensation of speed as the first wisps of high altitude cirrus whipped by. This was better, after all, than making a slow, dignified descent in the pinnace, with its inertial drive, or in one of the other rocket boats—old-fashioned but not so downright archaic as this re-entry vehicle—in which he had now and again ridden, that cautiously shinnied down, stern first, the incandescent columns of their exhaust gases. He felt confident enough to withdraw his attention from his instruments, to risk a sidewise glance at his companion.

Grimes was happy but Kravisky was not. The Surgeon Lieutenant's face had paled to a peculiar, pale green. He seemed to be swallowing something. *Physician, heal thyself*, thought Grimes sardonically. "I . . . I wish you'd look where you're going," mumbled the young doctor.

"Beautiful view, isn't it?" Grimes glanced through the ports, then at his console. There was nothing to worry about. He had a hemisphere to play around in. By the time he was down, the terminator would be just short of Lake Bluewater. It would be a daylight landing, to save these very casual locals in Port Control the trouble of setting out a flare path. There would be the radio beacon to home upon and at least twenty miles of smooth water for his runway. It was—he searched his memory for the expression used by long ago and faraway pilots of the Royal Air Force; history, especially the history of the ships of Earth's seas and air oceans, was his favorite reading—it was a piece of cake.

"Isn't it . . . isn't it hot in here?" Why couldn't Kravisky relax?

"Not especially. After all, we're sitting in a hot-monococque."

"What's that?" Then, with a feeble attempt at humor, "The remedy sounds worse than the disease . . ."

"Just an airborne thermos flask."

"Oh."

"Like a park, isn't it?" said Grimes. "Even from up here, like a park. Green. No industrial haze. No smog . . ."

"Too . . . tame," said Kravisky, taking a reluctant interest.

"No, I don't think so. They have mountains, and high ones, too. They have seas that must be rough sometimes, even with weather control. If they want to risk life and limb, there'll be plenty of

mountaineering and sailing . . ."

"And other sports . . ."

"Yeah." The radio compass seemed to be functioning properly, as were air speed indicator and radio altimeter. The note of the distant beacon was a steady hum. No doubt the El Doradans possessed far more advanced systems than were used by their own aircraft, but the reentry vehicle was not equipped to make use of them. "Yeah," said Grimes again. "Such as?"

"I'm a reservist, you know. But I'm also a ship's doctor in civil life. My last voyage before I was called up for my drill was in the Commission's *Alpha Cepheus* . . . A cruise to Caribbea. Passengers stinking with money and far too much time on their hands . . ."

"What's that to do with sports?"

"You'd be surprised. Or would you?"

No, thought Grimes, he wouldn't. His first Deep Space voyage had been as a passenger, and Jane Pentecost, the vessel's purser, had been very attractive. Where was she now? he wondered. Still in the Commission's ships, or back home, on the Rim?

Damn Jane Pentecost and damn the Rim Worlds. But this planet was nothing like Lorn, Faraway, Ultimo or Thule. He had never been to any of those dreary colonies (and never would go there, he told himself) but he had heard enough about them. Too much.

The air was denser now, and the control column that Grimes had been holding rather too negligently was developing a life of its own. Abruptly the steady note of the beacon changed to a morse A—dot dash, dot dash. Grimes tried to get the re-entry vehicle back on course, overcompensated. It was N now—dash dot, dash dot. The Lieutenant was sweating inside his suit when he had the boat under control again. Flying these antique crates was far too much like work. But he could afford another glance at the scenery.

There were wide fields, some green and some golden-glowing in the light of the afternoon sun, and in these latter worked great, glittering machines, obviously automatic harvesters. There were dense clumps of darker green—the forests which, on this world, had been grown for aesthetic reasons, not as a source of cellulose for industry. But the El Doradans, on the income from their mines alone, could well afford to import anything they needed. Or wanted. And only the odd gods of the Galaxy knew how many billions they had stashed away in the Federation Central Bank on Earth, to say nothing of other banks on other planets.

There were the wide fields and the forests, and towering up at the rim of the world the jagged blue mountains, the dazzlingly white-capped peaks. Rather too dazzling, but that was the glare of the late-

afternoon sun, broad on the starboard bow of the rocket boat. Grimes adjusted the viewport polarizer. He could see houses now, large dwellings, even from this altitude, each miles distant from its nearest neighbor, each blending rather than contrasting with the landscape. He could see houses and beyond the huge, gleaming, azure oval that was Lake Bluewater, there were the tall towers of Spaceport Control and the intense, winking red light that was the beacon. Beyond the port again, but distant, shimmered the lofty spires of the city.

All very nice, but what's the air speed? Too high, too bloody high. Cut the rocket drive? Yes. Drag'll slow her down nicely, and there're always the parachute brakes and, in an emergency, the retro-rockets. Still on the beam, according to the beacon. In any case, I can see it plainly enough. Just keep it dead ahead . . .

Getting bumpy now, and mushy . . . What else, in such an abortion of an aircraft? But not to worry. Coming in bloody nicely, though I say it as shouldn't.

Looks like pine trees just inland from the beach. Cleared them all right. Must say that those supercilious drongoes in Port Control might have made some sort of stab at talking me in. All they said, "You may land." Didn't quite say, "Use the servants' entrance . . ."

Parachute brakes? No. Make a big bloody splash in their bloody lake and play hell with their bloody goldfish . . .

Kravisky shouted, screamed almost, and then Grimes, whose attention had been divided between the beacon and the altimeter, saw, cutting across the rocket boat's course, a small surface craft, a scarlet hull skittering over the water in its own, self-generated, double plume of snowy spray. But it would pass clear.

But that slim, golden figure, gracefully poised on a single water ski, would not.

With a curse Grimes released the parachute brakes and, at the same time, yanked back on his control column. He knew that the parachutes would not take hold in time, that before the rocket boat stalled it would crash into the woman. Yet—he was thinking fast, desperately fast—he dared not use either his main rocket drive to lift the boat up and clear, or his retro-rockets. Better for her, whoever she was, to run the risk of being crushed than to face the certainty of being incinerated.

Then there were birds (birds?), great birds that flew headlong at the control cabin, birds whose suicidal impact was enough to slow the boat sufficiently, barely sufficiently, to tip her so that forward motion was transformed to upward motion. The drogues took hold of the water, and that was that. She fell, soggily, ungracefully, blunt stern first, and as she did so Grimes stared stupidly at a broken wing, a broken *metal* wing that had been skewered by the forward antenna.

Chapter 5

Neither Grimes nor Kravisky was hurt—seat padding and safety belts protected them from serious damage—but they were badly shaken. Grimes wondered, as the re-entry craft plunged below the churning surface of the lake, how deep it would sink before it rose again. And then he realized that it would not rise again, ever, or would not do so without the aid of salvage equipment. Aft there was an ominous gurgling that told its own story. Aft? That noise was now in the cabin itself. He looked down. The water was already about his ankles.

"Button up!" he snapped to the Surgeon Lieutenant.

"But what . . . ?" the words trailed off into silence.

"The ejection gear. I hope it works under water."

"But . . ." Kravisky, his faceplate still open, made as though to unsnap his seat belt. "The papers. Our uniforms. I must get them out of the locker . . ."

"Like hell you will. *Button up!*"

Sullenly, Kravisky checked that his belt was still tight, then sealed his helmet. Grimes followed suit. His hand hesitated over the big, red button on the control panel, then slammed down decisively. Even through the thick, resilient padding of his seat he felt the violent kick of the catapulting explosion. He cringed, expecting the skull-crushing impact of his head with the roof of the cabin, the last thing that he would ever feel. But it did not come, although he was faintly aware of the lightest of taps on his shoulder. And then he and the Surgeon Lieutenant, still strapped in their buoyant chairs, were shooting upwards, the sundered shell of the control cabin falling away beneath and below them, soaring to the surface in the midst of a huge bubble of air and other gases. Somehow he found time to look about him. The water was very blue and very clear. And there was a great, goggle-eyed fish staring at them from outside the bubble. It did not look especially carnivorous. Grimes hoped that it wasn't.

The two chairs broke surface simultaneously, bobbing and gyrating. Slowly, their motion ceased. They floated in the middle of a widening circle of discolored water, a spiralling swirl of iridescent oil slicks. And there were more than a few dead fish. Grimes could not repress a chuckle when he saw that they were golden carp. About five hundred yards away, its engine stopped, lay the scarlet power boat. But there was something in the water between it and the astronauts, something that was approaching at a speed that, to the spacemen should have been painfully slow and yet, in this environment, was

amazingly fast.

There was a sleek head in a golden helmet—no, decided Grimes, it was hair, not an artificial covering— and there was two slim, golden-brown arms that alternately flashed up and swept down and back. And there was the rest of her, slim and golden-brown all over. Somehow it was suddenly important to Grimes that he see her face. He hoped that it would match what he could already see.

As she neared the floating chairs she reverted to a breaststroke and then, finally, came to a standstill, hanging there, a yard or so distant, just treading water. The spacemen could not help staring at her body through the shimmering transparency, her naked body. It was beautiful. With a sudden start of embarrassment Grimes forced his gaze to slide upwards to her face. It was thin, the cheekbones pronounced, the planes of the cheeks flat. Her mouth was a wide, scarlet slash, parted to reveal perfect white teeth. The eyes were an intense blue, an angry blue. She was saying something, and it was obvious that she was not whispering.

Grimes put up his hand, opened the faceplate of his helmet.

". . . offworld yahoos!" he heard. "My two favorite watchbirds destroyed, thanks to your unspaceman-like antics!" Her voice was not loud but it carried well. It could best be described as an icy soprano.

"Madam," Grimes said coldly. It didn't sound quite right but it would have to do. "Madam, I venture to suggest that the loss of my own boat is of rather greater consequence than the destruction of your . . . pets." (Pets? Watchbirds? That obviously metallic wing skewered on the antenna?) He went on, "Our Captain expressly requested that this lake be cleared as a landing area."

"Your *Captain*?" She made it sound as though the commanding officer of a Zodiac Class cruiser ranked with but below the butler.

"Look here, young woman . . ."

"*What* did you call me?"

"If you aren't a young woman," contributed Kravisky, "you look remarkably like one."

In her fury the girl forgot to tread water. She went down, came up spluttering. Only one word was intelligible and that was "Insolence!" She reached out a long, slender arm, caught hold of a projection at the edge of Grimes' chair. She floated there, maintaining her distance, glaring up at him.

"Now, young lady . . ."

She was mollified but only slightly. "Don't call me that, either," she snapped.

"Then what . . . ?"

"I am the Princess Marlene von Stolzberg. You may call me 'Your

Highness'."

"Very well, Your Highness," said Grimes stiffly. "It may interest Your Highness to know that I intend to register a strong complaint with Spaceport Control. Your Highness's lack of ordinary commonsense put Your Highness's life as well as ours in hazard and resulted in the probable total loss of a piece of valuable Survey Service equipment."

"Commonsense?" she sneered. "And what about your own lack of that quality, to say nothing of your appalling spacemanship? You saw me. You must have seen me. And yet *you*, you . . . offworlder, assumed that *you* had the right to disturb my afternoon's recreation!" She made an explosive, spitting noise.

"Let us be reasonable, Your Highness," persisted Grimes. It cost nothing to play along. "No doubt there was some misunderstanding . . ."

"Misunderstanding?" Her fine eyebrows arched in incredulity. "Misunderstanding? I'll say there was. You come blundering in here like . . . like . . ."

"Like snotty-nosed ragamuffins from the wrong side of the tracks?" asked Grimes sardonically.

Surprisingly, she laughed, tinkling merriment that was not altogether malicious. "How well you put it, my man."

Now was the time to take advantage of her change of mood. "Do you think, Your Highness, that you could call to your friend in the boat so that he can pick us up?"

She laughed again. "My friend in the boat? But I am by myself." She turned her head toward the bright scarlet craft. She called softly, "Ilse! To me, Ilse!"

There was a sudden turbulence at the thing's stern. It turned until it was stem on to the astronauts and the princess. It came in slowly and steadily, turned again until it was broadside on to the girl, brought itself to a smooth halt by an exact application of stern power. A short ladder with handrails extruded itself with a muted click. The Princess Marlene let go of Grimes' chair; two graceful strokes took her to her mechanical servitor. As she climbed on board Grimes saw that she was one of those rare women whose nudity is even more beautiful out of the water than in it; the surprisingly full breasts, deprived of their fluid support, did not sag, and there were no minor blemishes to have been veiled by ripples. He felt a stab of disappointment as she reached down for a robe of spotless white towelling and threw it about her. Still watching her, he made to unsnap his seat belt.

"Not so fast, my man!" she called coldly. "Not so fast. You are not riding in with me. But I shall tow you in." Expertly, she threw the end

of a nylon line to Grimes. Not so expertly he caught it in his gloved hand.

"Thank you, Your Highness," he said as nastily as he dared.

* * *

The Port Control building, into which the girl finally led them, was deserted. She did not seem to be surprised. "After all," she condescended to explain, "Henri set up the beacon for you and gave you preliminary instructions. He assumed, wrongly, as it turned out, that you were good enough spacemen to find your way in by yourselves. After all, he has better things to do than to sit in this office all day."

"Such as?" asked Grimes. He added hastily, "Your Highness."

"Polo, of course."

"But, damn it all, we have to see *somebody*. We have to arrange for the landing and reception of the ship. We lost our uniforms when the boat went down, so we'd like a change of clothing. Spacesuits aren't very comfortable wear. Your Highness."

"Then take them off. I don't mind."

You wouldn't, thought Grimes. *The aristocrat naked before the serfs, the serfs naked before the aristocrat, what does it matter to the aristocrat?* He said, "The sun is down and it's getting chilly."

"Then keep them on."

"Please, Your Highness . . ." Grimes hated having to beg. He would far sooner have shaken some sense into this infuriating minx. But he was in enough trouble already. He was not looking forward explaining to Captain Daintree the loss of the re-entry vehicle. "Please, Your Highness, can't you help us?"

"Oh, all right. Although why you outworlders have to be so *helpless* is beyond me. Aren't you used to servants on your planets? I suppose not." She walked gracefully, her golden sandals faintly tapping on the polished floor, to what seemed to be, and was, a telephone booth. But there were neither dials nor buttons. She ordered, in her high, clear voice, "Get me the Comte de Messigny."

There was a brief delay, and then the screen on the rear wall of the booth swirled into glowing, three dimensional life. The man looking out from it was tall, clad in white helmet, shirt, riding breeches, and highly polished black boots. He lifted a slim, brown hand to the peak of his headgear in salute. A dazzling grin split the darkly tanned face under the pencil line of the mustache.

"Marlene!"

"Henri. Sorry to trouble you, but I've two lost sheep of spacemen here. They came blundering down in some sort of fire-breathing monstrosity—a dynosoar, would it be?—and cracked up in the

lake . . ."

"I did warn you, Marlene."

"There was no risk to me, Henri, although it did cost me my two best watchbirds. But these offworlders, I suppose you'd better do something about them . . ."

"I suppose so. Put them on, please, Marlene."

"Stand where I was standing," the girl said to Grimes. Then, in a voice utterly devoid of interest, "Good evening to you." Then she was gone.

Grimes was conscious of being examined by the unwinking, dark eyes of the man in the screen who, at last, demanded, "Well?"

"Lieutenant Grimes," he replied, adding "sir" to be on the safe side. "Of *Aries*, and this is Surgeon Lieutenant Kravisky. We are the advance landing party . . ."

"You've landed, haven't you?"

"Sir . . ." It hurt to bow and scrape to these civilians, with their absurd, unearned titles. "Sir, we wish to report our arrival. We wish to report, too, that we are in a condition of some distress. Our re-entry vehicle was wrecked and we were badly shaken up. We are unable to establish radio contact with *Aries* so that we may tell our Captain what has happened. Our uniforms were lost in the wreck. We request clothing and food and accommodations." *And a good, stiff drink*, he thought.

"I shall inform your Captain that you are here," said de Messigny. "Meanwhile, the automatic servitors in the hostel have been instructed to obey all reasonable orders. You will find that provisions have been made for your reception and comfort on the floor above the one where you are presently situated."

"Thank you, sir. But when shall we make arrangements for the berthing and reception of *Aries*?"

"Tomorrow, Lieutenant. I shall see you some time tomorrow. Good evening to you."

The screen went blank.

Grimes looked at Kravisky, and Kravisky looked at Grimes. Then they looked around the huge, gleaming hall, beautifully proportioned, opulent in its fittings and furnishings; but, like this entire planet, cold, cold.

Chapter 6

If there were elevators to the upper floors they must be, thought Grimes, very well concealed. Tiredly, acutely conscious of the discomfort of his clammy spacesuit, he trudged toward the ornamental spiral staircase that rose gracefully from the center of the iridescent, patterned floor. The Surgeon Lieutenant followed him, muttering something that sounded like, and probably was, "Inhospitable bastards!"

But the staircase was more than it seemed. As Grimes put his weight on the first of the treads, there was a subdued humming of machinery, almost inaudible, and he felt himself being lifted. The thing was, in fact, an escalator. For a few seconds Grimes' exhausted brain tried to grapple with the engineering problems involved in the construction of a moving stairway of this design, then gave up. It worked, didn't it? So what?

At the level of the next floor the treads flattened to a track, slid him gently on to the brightly colored mosaic of the landing. He waited there until he was joined by Kravisky. There was a sudden silence as the murmur of machinery ceased. The two men looked around. They were standing in a relatively small hallway, partly occupied by another staircase ascending to yet another level. The walls, covered with what looked like a silken fabric, were featureless. Suddenly a disembodied voice, cultured yet characterless, almost sexless yet male rather than female, spoke. "This way, please."

A sliding door had opened. Beyond it was a room, plainly furnished but comfortable enough, with two beds, chairs and a table. Apart from its size it could have been a ship's cabin. "Toilet facilities are on your right as you enter," the voice said. "Please leave soiled clothing in the receptacle provided."

"Perhaps a drink first . . ." suggested Kravisky.

"Toilet facilities are on your right as you enter. Please leave soiled clothing in the receptacle provided."

"I never did like arguing with robots," said Grimes. He walked slowly through the open doorway, then through the other door into the bathroom. As he turned, he saw that the main door had slid shut behind Kravisky. There did not seem to be any way of opening it from the inside, but, come to that, neither had there been any way of opening it from the outside. This should have seemed important, but right now the only matter of moment was shucking his stinking suit, clambering out of his sweat-soaked underwear. He pulled off his gloves, then clumsily fumbled with the fastenings of his armour. The

protective clothing, fabric and metal with plastic and metal attachments, fell to the floor with an audible clank and rattle. He stepped out of the boots, peeled off his underpants. Kravisky, he saw, was managing quite well and would require no assistance. He started toward one of the two shower stalls.

"Please leave soiled clothing in the receptacle provided," said the annoying voice.

Yes, there was a receptacle, but it had not been designed to accommodate such bulky accoutrements as spacesuits. The underpants went through the hinged flap easily enough, but it was obvious that a full suit of space armour would be beyond its capabilities. In any case, such items of equipment were supposed to be surrendered only to the ship's Armourer for servicing.

"Please leave . . ."

"It won't go in," stated Grimes.

"Please . . ." There was a pause, and then a new voice issued from the concealed speaker. It was still a mechanical one but somehow possessed a definite personality. "Please dispose of your smaller articles of clothing and leave your suits on the floor. They will be collected for dehydration and deodorization later."

By whom? wondered Grimes. *Or by what?* But he could, at least, enjoy his shower now without being badgered. Naked, he stepped into the stall. Before he could raise a hand the curtain slid across the opening, before he could look for controls a fine spray of warm, soapy water came at him from all directions. This was succeeded, after a few minutes, by water with no added detergent and, finally, by a steady blast of hot air. When he was dry, the curtain slid back and, greatly refreshed, he walked out into the main bathroom. He noticed at once that the spacesuits were gone. He shrugged; after all, he had already lost a reentry vehicle. He noticed, too, that two plain, blue robes were hanging inside the door and under each of them, on the floor, was a pair of slippers. He pulled one of the garments on to his muscular body, slid his feet into the soft leather footwear. They fitted as though they had been made for him. He went through into the bed-sitting room, waited for Kravisky. The subtly annoying voice asked, "Would you care for a drink before dinner?"

"Yes," answered Grimes. "We would. Two pink gins, please. Large. With ice."

A faint clicking noise drew his attention. He saw that an aperture had appeared in the center of the polished table top, realized that the stout pillar that was the only support of the piece of furniture must be a supply chute. There was another click and the panel was back in place, and on it were two misted goblets.

"Gin!" complained Kravisky. "Are you mad, John? We could have

that aboard the ship. Now's our chance to live it up." He added, "I would have ordered Manzanilla."

"Sorry, Doc. I was forgetting that you have personal experience of how the filthy rich live. You can order dinner."

He dropped into one of the chairs at the table, picked up and sipped his drink with appreciation. After all, it wasn't bad gin.

* * *

"Please order your meal," said the voice.

Grimes looked at the Surgeon Lieutenant over what remained of his second gin—obviously they were to be allowed no more—and said, "Go ahead, Doc."

Kravisky licked his full lips a little too obviously. "Well . . ." he murmured. "Well . . ." He stared at the ceiling. "Of course, John, I'm a rather old-fashioned type. To my mind there's nothing like good, Terran food, properly cooked, and Terran wines. On a Terraformed planet such as this it must be available."

"Such as?" asked Grimes, knowing, from his own experience, that the foods indigenous to the overcrowded and urbanized home planet were among the most expensive in the Man-colonized Galaxy.

"Please order your meal," said the voice.

"Now . . . Let me see . . . Caviar, I think. Beluga, of course. With *very* thin toast. And unsalted butter. And to follow? I think, John, that after the caviar we can skip a fish course, although Dover sole or blue trout would be good . . . Yes, blue trout. And then? Pheasant under glass, perhaps, with new potatoes and *petit pois*. Then Crepes Suzette. Then fruit—peaches and strawberries should do. Coffee, of course, with Napoleon brandy. And something *good* in the way of an Havana cigar apiece . . ."

"Rather shaky there, aren't you?" commented Grimes.

"In the cruise ships the tucker was for free but the cigars weren't, and even duty free they were rather expensive. But I haven't finished yet. To drink *with* the meal . . . With the caviar, make it vodka. Wolfschmidt. Well chilled. And then a magnum of Pommery . . ."

"I hope that they don't send the bill to Captain Daintree," said Grimes.

The center panel of the table sank from sight. After a very brief delay it rose again. On it were two full plates, two glasses, a carafe of red wine, cutlery and disposable napkins.

"What . . . what's *this*?" almost shouted Kravisky, picking up his fork and prodding the meat on his plate with it. "Steak!" he complained.

"We were instructed to obey all *reasonable* orders," said the mechanical voice coldly.

"But . . ."

"We were instructed to obey all reasonable orders."

"Looks like it's all we're getting," said Grimes philosophically. "Better start getting used to life in the servants' hall, Doc." He pulled his plate to him, cut off and sampled a piece of the meat. "And, after all, this is not at all bad."

It was, in fact, far better than anything from *Aries'* tissue culture vats and, furthermore, had not been ruined in the cooking by the cruiser's galley staff. Grimes, chewing stolidly, admitted that he was enjoying it more than he would have done the fancy meal that the Doctor had ordered.

Even so, their contemptuous treatment by the robot servitors, and by the robots' masters, rankled.

Chapter 7

The two men slept well in their comfortable beds, the quite sound brandy that had been served with their after-dinner coffee cancelling out the effects of nervous and physical overexhaustion and the strangeness of an environment from which all the noises, of human and mechanical origin, that are so much the manifestation of the life of a ship were missing. It seemed to Grimes that he had been asleep only for minutes when an annoyingly cheerful voice was chanting, "Rise and shine! Rise and shine!" Nonetheless, he was alert at once, opening his eyes to see that the soft, concealed lighting had come back on. He looked at his wrist watch, which he had set to the Zone Time of the spaceport, adjusting it at the same time to the mean rotation of Eldorado before leaving the cruiser. 0700 hours. It was high time that he was up and doing something about everything.

He slid out of the bed. Kravisky, in his own couch, was still huddled under the covers, moaning unhappily, the voice, louder now, was still chanting, "Rise and shine!"

There was a silver tea service on the table. Grimes went to it, poured himself a cup of tea, added milk and plenty of sugar. He sipped it appreciatively. He called to the Surgeon Lieutenant, "Show a leg, you lazy bastard. Come and have your tea while it's hot."

The doctor's rumpled head emerged from under the sheet. "I *never* have tea first thing in the morning," he complained. "I always have coffee."

"You should have made your wishes known before you retired last night," said the robot voice reprovingly. *At least*, thought Grimes, *this was a change from that irritating sing-song.*

"Oh, all right. *All* right." Kravisky got out of bed, pulled his robe about his thin body, joined Grimes at the table. He slopped tea from the pot into the thin, porcelain cup, slopping much of it into the saucer. He grimaced at the first mouthful. Then he asked, "What now, John?"

"Get ourselves cleaned up. The fleet's in port, or soon will be, and not a whore in the house washed."

"How can you be so bloody cheerful?"

"I always wake up this way."

Grimes set down his empty cup, went through to the bathroom. On the shelf under the mirror were two new toothbrushes, toothpaste, a tube of depilatory cream. *Service*, he thought. *But, so far, without a smile.* By the time that he was in the shower the Surgeon Lieutenant was commencing his own ablutions, was still showering when Grimes

walked back into the bedroom. The beds, he saw, had been remade. He had heard nothing, decided that they must have been removed and replaced in the same way that the table service operated. On each tautly spread coverlet was fresh clothing: underwear, a shirt, a pair of shorts, sandals. Very gay the apparel looked against the dark, matte blue of the bedspreads—the shirts an almost fluorescent orange, the shorts a rich emerald green.

He said aloud, "Uniform would have been better."

The disembodied voice replied, "We have not the facilities."

"You won't have to explain to the Old Man why you aren't wearing the rig of the day," remarked Grimes.

There was silence. Haughty? Hurt? But it was better than some mechanical wisecrack.

"Breakfast," said Kravisky, who had come in from the bathroom.

It was standing there on the table—a coffeepot and cups, cream, sugar, two halves of grapefruit, toast, butter, honey and two covered plates. The Surgeon Lieutenant lifted one of the covers. "The spaceman's delight," he complained. "Ham and eggs."

"What's wrong with that? "

"Nothing. But I would have preferred kidneys and bacon."

"We are not telepathic," said the smug voice.

Breakfast over, the two men dressed. They looked at each other dubiously. "And do we have to face the Old Man like this?" asked Kravisky. "You should have let me save our uniforms, John."

"There wasn't time, Doc. It was all we could do to save ourselves."

"Look. The door's opening."

"Take the escalator to the next upper floor," ordered the robot voice. "You will find the Princess von Stolzberg and the Comte de Messigny awaiting you."

"And wipe the egg off your face," said Grimes to Kravisky.

* * *

There was an office on the next floor that, judging by the equipment along two of its walls, was also the spaceport control tower. In one of the big screens swam the image of *Aries*, a silvery, vaned spindle gleaming against the interstellar dark. It was the sight of his ship that first caught Grimes' attention but did not hold it for long. Inevitably his regard shifted to the woman who stood to one side of the screen, the tall woman with her hair braided into a golden coronet, sparkling with jewels, clad in a flowing white tunic of some diaphanous material that barely concealed the lines of her body. He smiled at her but her blue eyes, as she looked back at him, were cold. To her right was the tall man to whom they had talked the previous evening. He was in uniform, black and gold, with four gold bands on

the cuffs of his superbly tailored tunic, a stylized, winged rocket gleaming on the left breast. So appareled he was obviously a spaceman, although, as Grimes well knew, it takes far more than gold braid and brass buttons to make an astronaut.

"Henri," said the girl quietly, "these are the two . . . gentlemen from the *Aries*. Mr. Grimes, this is Captain de Messigny."

De Messigny extended his hand without enthusiasm. Grimes shook it. It was like handling a dead fish. Kravisky shook it. The Comte said in a bored voice, "Of course, I am, as it were, only the Acting Harbourmaster. As the senior Master of our own small merchant fleet I was requested to make the arrangements for the landing of your ship." He waved a hand and a hitherto dull screen lit up, displaying what was obviously a plan of the spaceport. "But what is there to arrange? As you see, we can accommodate a squadron. Our own vessels are in their underground hangars, so the apron is absolutely clear. All that your Captain has to do is to set down *Aries* anywhere within the landing area."

"If he's as good a ship-handler as certain of his officers . . ." sneered the girl.

"Now, Marlene, that was quite uncalled for. You did make a small contribution to their crack-up, you know." He waved his hand again, and a triangle of bright red flashing lights appeared on the plan. "Still, I have actuated the beacons. They will serve as a guide."

"Has Captain Daintree been informed, sir?" asked Grimes.

"Of course."

"Has he been informed of the . . . er . . . circumstances of our landing?"

De Messigny smiled. "Not yet, Lieutenant. I told him last night that you were unable to get into direct radio contact with your ship, but no more than that. It will be better if you make your own report on the loss of the re-entry vehicle."

"Yes . . ." agreed Grimes unhappily.

"Very well, then." The tall man made casual gestures with his right hand. Some sort of visual code? wondered Grimes. Or did the controls of this fantastic communications equipment possess built-in psionic capabilities? Anyhow, de Messigny waved his hand and another screen came alive. It depicted the familiar interior of the control room of *Aries* and, in the foreground, the face of the Senior Communications Officer. His eyes lit up with recognition; it was obvious that he could see as well as be seen.

"Captain Daintree," snapped de Messigny. It was more of an order than a request.

"Yes, sir. In a moment."

And then the Old Man was glaring out of the screen. "Mr. Grimes! Mr. Kravisky! Why are you not in uniform?"

"We . . . we lost our uniforms, sir."

"You *lost* your uniforms?" Daintree's voice dropped to a menacing growl. "I am well aware, Mr. Grimes, that things seem to happen to you that happen to no other officer in the ship but, even so . . . Perhaps you will be so good as to explain how you mislaid the not inexpensive clothing with which the Survey Service, in a moment of misguided altruism, saw fit to cover your repulsive nakedness."

"We . . . we lost the re-entry vehicle, sir."

There was a long silence, during which Grimes waited for his commanding officer to reach critical mass. But, surprisingly, when Daintree spoke, his voice was almost gentle.

"But you didn't lose yourselves. Oh, no. That would be too much to hope for. But I shall have to make some sort of report to my Lords Commissioners, Mr. Grimes, and you may care to assist me in this duty by explaining. If you can."

"Well, sir, we were coming in to a landing on the surface of Lake Bluewater. As instructed."

"Yes. Go on."

Grimes looked at the girl, thought that he was damned if he was going to hide behind a woman's skirts. She returned his gaze coldly. He shrugged, no more than a twitch of his broad shoulders. He faced the screen again, saying, "I made an error of judgment, sir."

"An expensive one, Mr. Grimes, both to the Service and to yourself."

And then the Princess Marlene von Stolzberg was standing beside the Lieutenant. "Captain Daintree," she said haughtily, "your officer was not responsible for the loss of your dynosoar. If anybody was, it was I."

Daintree's heavy eyebrows lifted. "*You*, Madam?"

"Yes. It was my hour for water-skiing on the lake, and I saw no reason to cancel my evening recreation because of the proposed landing. I did not think, of course, that any Captain in his right senses would send his advance party down to a planetary surface in such an archaic, unhandy contraption as a dynosoar. Your Mr. Grimes was obliged to take violent evasive action as soon as he saw me cutting across his path. Furthermore, my two watchbirds, seeing that I was in danger, attacked the re-entry vehicle which, in consequence, crashed."

"Oh. Captain de Messigny, is this lady's story true?"

"It is, Captain Daintree."

"Thank you. And may I make a humble request, Captain?"

"You may, Captain."

"Just refrain, if you can, from holding tennis tournaments on the landing field or from converting the apron into a rollerskating rink when I'm on *my* way down. Over," he concluded viciously, "and *out!*"

Chapter 8

They watched *Aries* come in—de Messigny, the Princess and, a little to one side, Grimes and Kravisky. Grimes had thought it strange that the spaceport control tower should be left unmanned at this juncture, but the two El Doradans, coldly and amusedly, had informed him that the electronic intelligences housed therein were quite capable of handling any normal landing without any human interference. Grimes did not like the way that the Comte slightly stressed the word "normal."

They stood there, the four of them, on the edge of the apron, well clear of the triangle of red lights. Above them, on gleaming wings, wheeled and hovered a quartet of flying things that looked like birds, that must be four of the watchbirds about which Grimes had already heard, which, in fact, he had already encountered. (*And, he thought glumly, there was still the enquiry into the loss of the re-entry vehicle to face.*)

The two El Doradans ignored their mechanical guardians. The Lieutenant could not, wondering what would happen should he make some inadvertent move that would be construed by the electronic brains as an act of hostility. He started to edge a little further away from Marlene von Stolzberg and de Messigny, then, with an audible grunt, stood his ground.

They saw the ship before they heard her—at first a glittering speck in the cloudless, morning sky and then, after only a few seconds, a gleaming spindle. She was well in sight when there drifted down to them the odd, irregular throbbing of an inertial drive unit in operation, no more than an uneasy mutter to begin with but swelling to an ominous, intermittent thunder, the voice of the power that had hurled men out among the stars.

But this was all wrong. On any civilized world, or on any civilized world other than this, there would have been an honor guard, ranks of soldiers, in ceremonial uniform, drawn to rigid attention. There would have been antique cannon with black powder charges to fire a salute to the Captain of a major Terran war vessel. There would have been flags and ceremonial. But here, here there was only one man—and his uniform, after all, was a mercantile one—and one woman. A self-styled Princess, perhaps, but even so . . . *And, thought Grimes, there's also Kravisky and myself, but dressed like beach boys.*

Lower dropped the ship, and lower, the noise of her Drive deafening now, every protrusion, every mast, turret and sponson that broke the smooth lines of her hull visible to the naked eye. From a

staff just abaft her sharp stem the ensign of the Survey Service—a golden S on a black field, with the green, blue and gold globe of Earth in the upper canton—was broken out, streamed vertically upwards. Grimes did not have to turn to see that there was no bunting displayed from the masts of the spaceport administration buildings. Perhaps, he thought, there were in the Universe aristocrats sufficiently courteous to put out more flags to celebrate the arrival of snotty-nosed ragamuffins from the wrong side of the tracks, but the only aristocratic quality to be found in abundance on El Dorado was arrogance.

She was down at last, a shining, metallic tower poised between the buttresses of her tripedal landing gear. She was down and until the moment that Captain Daintree cut the Drive, an egg trapped between one of the huge pads and the concrete of the apron would have remained unbroken. And then the sudden silence as the machinery slowed to a halt was broken by the almost inaudible hissings and creakings as the ship's enormous mass adjusted itself to the gravitational field of the planet.

There were other soft noises behind the original reception party. Grimes turned. Three air cars of graceful, almost fragile design were coming in to a smooth landing, each attended by its pair of hovering watch-birds. From the first stepped a fat, bald, yellow-skinned man, his gross body draped in a dark blue robe. From the second emerged a tall, thin individual, black coated, gray trousered, wearing on his head a black hat of antique design. The occupant of the third car was a superbly made Negro, clad in a leopard skin flung carelessly about his body.

Grimes turned again, stiffening to attention, as he heard the bugles. *Aries* had her ramp out now, extending to the ground from the after airlock door. Stiffly, the two Marine buglers marched down it and as they set foot on the apron, raised their gleaming instruments to their lips and sounded another call. Twenty Marines came next, under their Major, and formed two ranks on either side of the foot of the ramp. Then Captain Daintree appeared in the circular doorway, all black and gold and starched white linen, his cocked hat on his head, his ceremonial sword at his side, his decorations gleaming on his breast. He was followed by Surgeon Commander Passifern, looking a little (but only a little) ill at ease in his full dress finery. Marlene von Stolzberg whispered something to her companions and giggled.

Slowly, more like a humanoid robot than a man, Captain Daintree marched towards the waiting group, Passifern keeping step behind him. He glared at Grimes and Kravisky, standing there in their gaudy civilian clothes. His glance flickered over the others. Grimes could almost hear him thinking; who was in authority? Somehow he

contrived a salute that included all of them. De Messigny answered it with a casual flip of his hand toward the gold-crusted peak of his cap, then stepped forward. He said, "We have already met at long range, Captain Daintree."

"Yes, M'sieur le Comte."

"Allow me to introduce the Princess Marlene von Stolzberg . . ." Daintree bowed slightly. "And Lord Tarlton of Dunwich, our Physician in Residence . . ." The tall, thin man in the black coat extended a pale hand; Daintree gripped it briefly. "And the Baron Takada . . ." The fat Oriental hissed and bobbed. "And Hereditary Chief Lobenga . . ." The big Negro's handshake made Daintree wince visibly. But his voice was cold and formal as he said, "To complete the introductions, this is Surgeon Commander Passifern, my Senior Medical Officer."

There was a long silence, broken by Daintree. He stated, "You asked for our assistance. Might I suggest that this is hardly the place to discuss the details. Perhaps Her Highness and you . . . er . . . gentlemen would care to step aboard my ship. I take it that you are representative of your government."

"We have no government, Captain Daintree, such as you understand the word," said de Messigny. "But it was decided that this little group here was best qualified to meet you. Will it be possible for you and Commander Passifern to come with us to the city? We shall provide transport."

"Very well," said Daintree. He looked at Grimes as he added, "I assume that your own atmosphere fliers are not harassed by careless sportsmen and sportswomen."

Grimes flushed as he heard Marlene von Stolzberg laugh softly.

Chapter 9

Captain Daintree could not spare the time for an interview with the two officers of the advance party; he, with Dr. Passifern, was making his preparations and arrangements for the trip to the city, on which he and the Surgeon Commander would be accompanied by the Paymaster Lieutenant who was Daintree's secretary and by the Lieutenant of Marines. But Commander Griffin had time to spare. No sooner had Grimes and Kravisky mounted to the head of the ramp than the public address speakers were blating their names, ordering them to report at once to the Commander's office.

They would have liked to have changed into more suitable attire, and Kravisky, in fact, did suggest that they do so. But that 'at once' at the end of the announcement had a nasty, peremptory ring to it, and Grimes knew Griffin far better than did the Surgeon Lieutenant. So they hurried through the ship, acutely conscious of the amused glances directed at them by the officers and ratings they encountered in the alleyways. Grimes heard one man mutter to his companion, "These officers don't half have it good! Looks like they've been on a bleeding holiday . . ."

And now the holiday, such as it had been, was over. Griffin, seated behind his tidy desk, regarded them coldly, his fat face sullen under the sandy hair.

"So," he said. "So." There was an uneasy silence.

"So you lose an expensive re-entry vehicle. Even if it can be salvaged, there will be repairs. So you rejoin the ship looking like a pair of beach bums." His podgy hands shuffled papers. "There will have to be an official report, you know. Or didn't that occur to you?"

"It had occurred to me, sir," replied Grimes.

"I am pleased to hear it, although I was far from pleased with the verbal report you made to the Captain. There is one important thing that you must learn, Mr. Grimes, and that is that although an officer is automatically a gentleman he should not, repeat not, allow chivalry to interfere with his duty. If that woman had not admitted that she was to blame for the loss of the dynosoar, the consequences to you could have been extremely serious, affecting most adversely your future career in this Service. As it is . . ." He grinned suddenly, relaxed visibly. "As it is, I hope that they never salvage that archaic contraption. It's always been a pain in the neck to me. Sit down, both of you." He pushed a box of cigarettes across his desk. "Smoke. And now, before you go away to start putting things down on paper in your best officialese, tell me in your own words just what has been

happening to you.

* * *

Grimes told the Commander the full story, omitting nothing. Griffin was amused but, at the same time, annoyed. He said, "I gain the impression that everybody on this bloody planet has a title, except the butler. And he's a robot."

"That's the very impression that we gained," Grimes told him. "And even their robot servitors are snobs."

"You can say that again," declared Kravisky, and told again the story of the superb meal that he had ordered but not received.

"And yet they want our help . . ." mused the Commander. "It must have hurt their pride to have to call in outsiders. Whatever sort of a jam they're in, it must be a serious one."

"Have you any idea what it is, sir?" asked Grimes.

"Haven't a clue. Oh, it's something medical, we all know that much. But a world like this must be healthy. This Lord Tarlton of Dunwich, he used to be *the* physician on the planet of that name, although then he was plain Dr. Tarlton. He was the head of their College of Medicine, and we all know how highly a Dunwich degree is regarded throughout the Galaxy. As a diagnostician, he was a recognized genius. It seems incredible that he should be incapable of handling this emergency, whatever it is. What do you think, Kravisky? As a doctor, I mean."

"I think the same as you do, sir."

"And these others . . . I've been doing my homework in the microfiled Encyclopedia Galactica Year Books. Baron Takada. A multimillionaire on his planet of birth, Kobe. Flew the coop when the local income tax collectors got too avaricious. But known as much for his metaphysical researches as for his wealth. Hereditary Chief Lobenga, onetime native, and ruler, of New Katanga. Stinking rich, of course, but made his own world too hot to hold him by his dabbling in the more unsavory varieties of black magic."

"And the Princess?" asked Grimes.

Griffin chuckled. "She seems to have made quite an impression on you. Just a spoiled popsy from Thuringia. Too much money and didn't like to have to plough any of it back into the welfare of the miners and factory hands. Sold out at a pretty profit and bought her way into the El Dorado Corporation. De Messigny? Not even a millionaire but had a name as a space yachtsman and freelance explorer. I suppose that these people wanted somebody who was more or less their breed of cat to captain their merchant ships."

"All these titles . . ." said Kravisky.

"Fair dinkum, most of 'em. I often think that all these stories

about effete aristocrats are put out by the aristocrats themselves. After all, *they* have practiced selective breeding for centuries . . ." He leaned back in his chair. "Money snobbery, snobbery of birth . . . It makes a pretty picture, doesn't it? And you two were in the picture. I suppose that we all are, now." His manner stiffened. "But if there's to be any shore leave, which I doubt, I shall impress upon every bastard aboard this ship, every officer, every rating, that he is to wear his uniform with *pride*.

"And, talking of uniforms . . ."

"We'd better get changed, sir," said Grimes.

"You'd better," said Griffin.

Chapter 10

Captain Daintree and the officers who had accompanied him returned from the city the following morning, delivered back to the spaceport by one of the graceful flying cars. The captain went straight to his own quarters, accompanied by Griffin, who had received him at the airlock. Dr. Passifern went straight to the ship's well-equipped laboratory, where his own staff was awaiting him. Paymaster Lieutenant Hodge and Lieutenant Lamont, of the Marine Corps, made their way to the wardroom, where all the off-duty officers, including Grimes, were already gathered.

"And what have you to say for yourself, Pusser?" demanded Lieutenant Commander Cooper.

Hodge, a slight, clerkly young man, made a major production of drawing a cup of coffee from the dispenser. He sipped it, made a grimace. He complained, "*They* serve much better espresso than this . . ."

"You did more than drink coffee," stated Cooper.

"We did," said the Marine, stroking the luxuriant mustache that was supposed to give him a martial appearance. "We did. We sat around trying to look intelligent while our lords and masters conferred with all the counts and barons and princes and whatever."

"Any princesses?" asked somebody.

"Yes. There was one, come to think of it. A quite tasty blonde piece. Which reminds me, she gave me a letter for you, young Grimes."

"Never mind Mr. Grime's love life," said Cooper a little jealously. "That can wait. Why were we asked to call here ? Or is that classified?"

"It is," Hodge told him primly. "No doubt the Captain will release such information as he sees fit when he feels like it."

"But we weren't told to say nothing of what we *saw*," pointed out Lamont.

"Can I have my letter?" asked Grimes.

"Later, later. It will keep."

"Mr. Grimes!" snapped Cooper, "I will not have the wardroom turned into a beer garden. You will please refrain from laying hands upon the brutal and licentious soldiery. Please continue, Mr. Lamont."

"Well, Pilot, we were taken to the city, as you know. That air car was really posh. Some sort of Inertial Drive but fully automated. There was a girl in charge of it, a Lady Jane Kennelly, one of those really snooty redheads, and she never laid so much as a pinky on the

controls, just said in a bored voice, 'Head Office,' and the thing replied—there was a speaker on the console—'Head Office, your ladyship. Certainly, your ladyship.' I felt like saying, 'Home, James, and don't spare the horses,' but the Old Man gave me such a dirty look that I thought better of it.

"She, this Lady Jane, wasn't in a conversational mood and neither was the Old Man, so *nobody* talked. It was only a short flight, anyhow. We passed over what looked like farms, but more like gardens than farms, if you know what I mean. We saw big, specialized machines working in the fields, but never a human being.

"Then we came to the city. Oh, I know that we've all seen it from the air, but you have to be flying through it, below the level of the towers, really to appreciate it. Just towers, spires, rather, and each of them standing in its own park. Not many people around, and nobody looking to be in any sort of a hurry. Quite a few machines like oversized beetles pottering around in the gardens. My own interest in botany doesn't go beyond things you eat and drink, like cauliflowers and hops, but even I could see that just about every species of flower in the whole damn Galaxy must have been in full bloom in those beds.

"We dropped down on to a lawn in front of the really big tower, so tall that the big, golden standard flying from its peak was half-obscured by a wisp of low cloud. And it's not one of those flimsy, reinforced plastic jobs, either. Solid granite, it looked like. Solid granite, and polished, with a bit of gold trim here and there. Not at all gaudy. Like a huge tombstone, a multimillionaire's tombstone, in good taste.

"Lady Jane said, in her cool voice, 'This is the end of the penny section.' She made it quite clear that she'd done her job and that what happened next was none of her concern. The door of the car opened and we got out. The Old Man first, then Doc, then the Pusser's pup, then myself. We were hardly clear of the car when the door shut and it lifted and went whiffing off down the avenue. So we stood there, sort of shuffling our feet and coughing politely. Shuffling our feet? That grass felt good. I'd have loved to have kicked off my boots and walked on it barefooted.

"By this time the Old Man was looking more than somewhat thunderous. He was just about to say something when I saw a big door opening at the base of the tower. And one of those damned mechanical voices that seemed to be coming from nowhere, or everywhere, said, very politely, 'Please to enter, gentlemen.'

"So we entered."

"And then?" pressed Cooper. "And then?"

"I think that's as far as we can take you," Hodge told him severely. "I think we've told you too much already."

"What about my letter?" asked Grimes.

"Shut up!" snarled the Navigator. He turned again to the Marine and Paymaster Lieutenant. "But you must know what it's all about."

"Yes, we know," Hodge told him smugly. "But until we have the Captain's permission we cannot tell you."

Lament looked at the clerical officer with some distaste. Obviously he disliked having his story spoiled by this over-meticulous observance of regulations. He said, "I don't think that I'm contravening the Official Secrets Act or its Survey Service equivalent if I tell you that, although we saw quite a few people in the city, we didn't see a single child. Neither did we see in any of the parks and gardens we flew over anything that looked like a children's playground . . ."

There was a silence while those in the wardroom pondered the implications of Lament's statement. It was broken by Grimes. "And now can I have my letter, Lament?"

"What a one-track mind!" said Cooper, almost admiringly.

"Perhaps it's the right track," Grimes told him.

"Do you think *they* haven't tried it, lover boy?" sneered the Lieutenant Commander.

Chapter 11

As soon as he was able Grimes got away from the wardroom, hurried to his spartan dogbox of a cabin. He looked at the letter for quite a long while before he opened it. The envelope was pale blue and conveyed, by appearance and texture, an impression of expensiveness and quality. The address, Grimes decided at last, was typewritten, although he had never either seen or heard of a machine with Gothic characters. He grinned faintly. With that type, *Herr Leutnant* would have looked so much better than the plain, ordinary *Lieutenant*.

There was a tiny tab on the pack of the envelope that made for easier opening. Grimes pulled it and the flap fell away. Immediately he was conscious of a hint of perfume, remembered it as the scent that the princess had worn at the time of their last meeting. He began to feel even more impatient, extracted the sheet of paper and unfolded it. It, too, was pale blue, deckle-edged, luxurious to sight and touch. The letter, apart from the firm, decisive signature, had been written by the same machine as the address. *Dear Mr. Grimes*, he read. *Having met and talked with your Captain I now realize how thoughtless and selfish my behavior was on the occasion of your landing on Lake Bluewater. On this world we are prone to forget that the mores of other planets are different from our own. Perhaps, when Captain Daintree grants shore leave, you would care to be my guest.*

Marlene.

He pursed his lips and whistled softly. *But it means nothing*, he told himself. *Just noblesse oblige. Or throw the good doggie a nice bone.* The Universe was full of people who said, "But you must stay with us . . ." And then were surprised and pained when you turned up their front doorstep, suitcase in hand. In any case, it yet remained to be seen whether or not Daintree would allow planet liberty.

The bulkhead speaker burped, then announced, "Attention all! Attention all! This is the Captain speaking. It is my pleasure to announce that the local authorities have agreed to permit shore leave. Arrangements will be made for sightseeing trips and the like. Details will be promulgated by Heads of Departments." There was a pause, then Daintree added, "Mr. Grimes to report to me at once."

So he can tell me that my leave is stopped, thought Grimes glumly.

* * *

"Sit down, Grimes." Captain Daintree was almost affable. Grimes sat down.

"Ah, yes, Mr. Grimes. This business of the loss of the re-entry

vehicle . . ."

"Sir?"

Surprisingly, the Old Man grinned. "There was a film made of the whole sorry business. One of those damned robots in Spaceport Control records, as a matter of routine, every spaceship arrival and departure. I saw the film." He grinned again. "I must admit that the spectacle of the Princess attired in a single water ski was, shall we say, distracting. An odd woman, Her Highness. But attractive, very attractive . . ."

Come to the point, you old goat, thought Grimes.

"Yes, very attractive and very frank. She freely admits that she was to blame for the bungled landing. Not that I altogether agree with her, but even so . . . As I've already said, an odd woman. With odd tastes. Very odd. Believe it or not, she wants to be your hostess during this vessel's stay on El Dorado." Daintree paused. Grimes decided not to say anything. Daintree went on, "I told her, of course, that your duties toward the ship come first. You have still to write the report on the loss of the dynosoar. You have still to oversee and carry out salvage operations; I declined Comte de Messigny's offer of equipment and robot submarine workers. Then you have to write the report upon the salvage."

"Of course, sir."

"I'm glad that you show some sense of responsibility. But when all these tasks have been completed to my satisfaction, *and not before*, you will be granted leave until the vessel's departure. This Princess von Stolzberg appears to be one of the rulers of this planet, insofar as they have rulers, so it might be advisable to, as it were, humor her."

"Thank you, sir."

"Don't thank me, Mr. Grimes. Thank Her Highness. *When* you get around to meeting her again."

If I ever do, thought Grimes.

Daintree, who had his telepathic moments, laughed. "You will, Mr. Grimes. You will. This medical emergency, I suppose that it could be called that, of theirs is more serious and less straightforward than an epidemic of measles. If *their* quacks can't come up with an answer, I can't see our Dr. Passifern and his aides getting to the bottom of the problem in five seconds flat . . ." He opened the box on his desk. "Smoke, Grimes?"

"My pipe if I may, sir."

"Suit yourself." Daintree tapped the end of his cigarette on his thumbnail to ignite the tobacco, looked thoughtfully at the thin, rising spiral of smoke. "Yes, quite a problem they have, these El Doradans. It all goes to show that money cannot buy happiness . . ."

"But with it, sir," pointed out Grimes, "you can, at least, be miserable in comfort."

"Ha! Very good. I must remember that. But it is a most peculiar situation. As you know, they bought this planet and then, at enormous expense, terraformed it. With improvements. They stocked with all the flora and fauna necessary for sport as well as food. Insofar as the animal and plant kingdoms are concerned the normal cycle of birth, procreation, death has been in operation from the very start. Insofar as the humans are concerned, there are no births. No, that's not quite correct. Some of the women were pregnant when they came here. The youngest of the children born on El Dorado is now a girl of seventeen."

"Something in the air, or the water, sir?"

"Could be, Grimes. Could be. But I'm a spaceman, not a quack. I wouldn't know. If it is, it must be something remarkably subtle. And you'd think that such an . . . agent? would affect the plants and the livestock as well as the people."

Grimes, flattered by the honor of a conversation with the normally unapproachable Captain, ventured another opinion. "Do you think, sir, that they called us in so that we could . . . ? How can I put it? A sort of artificial insemination by donor? Only not so artificial."

"Mr. Grimes!" Daintree at once reverted to his normal manner. "I ask, no, I order, you to put such ideas out of your alleged mind at once. These people, and never forget it, are in their own estimation the aristocrats of the Galaxy. They want children to inherit their wealth, their titles. But they made it quite clear to me that such children must be sired by themselves, not by mongrel outsiders." His face darkened. "I don't mind telling you, Mr. Grimes, that I was furious when I heard that term used. But, bear this in mind, if there are any incidents during this vessel's stay on El Dorado it will go hard, very hard indeed, with those responsible. You will learn, Mr. Grimes, that a senior officer has very often, too often, to subordinate his own true feelings to the well-being of his Service. We are not, repeat not, a drunken, roistering crew of merchant spacemen. We are Survey Service, and every man, from myself to the lowest mess boy, will comport himself like a gentleman."

And one definition of a gentleman, thought Grimes, is a man who takes his weight on his elbows . . .

"And this offer of hospitality by the Princess von Stolzberg, it's no more than her way of apologizing to you and to the Survey Service. You'd better not get any false ideas."

"I won't, sir."

"Very well. That will do. See the Commander and ask him for the necessary men and equipment for the salvage of the re-entry vehicle. I

have already told him that the entire operation is to be directly under your charge."

"Very good, sir."

Grimes got to his feet, stiffened to attention in salute, turned about smartly and marched towards the door. Daintree's snarl halted him abruptly.

"Mr. Grimes!"

"Sir?"

"I know that I'm only the Captain, but may I point out that it is not correct to take official leave of a senior officer with a pipe stuck in the middle of your cretinous face?"

"Sorry, sir."

"And, Mr. Grimes, may I request that you watch your manners when you are mingling with the aristocracy?"

"I'll do my best, sir."

"Your best, on far too many occasions, has not been good enough. Get out!"

Ears burning, Grimes got out.

Chapter 12

The following morning Grimes started the salvage operations.

As a unit of the Survey Service fleet, *Aries* was rich in all manner of equipment. She was a fighting ship but, officially at least, her prime function was exploration and survey, and a newly discovered watery world cannot be properly surveyed without underwater gear. Insofar as the raising of the dynosoar was concerned, the engineers' workshop was able to supply, at short notice, what little extra was needed.

Commander Griffin had let Grimes have one of the work boats, a powerful little brute fitted with inertial drive, aboard which the engineers had installed a powerful air compressor. There were coils of tough, plastic hose, together with the necessary valves and connections. There was a submarine welding outfit and a good supply of metal plates of various shapes and sizes. There were scuba outfits for Grimes and for the men who would be working with him.

Shortly after dawn the airlock high on *Aries'* side opened and the work boat, muttering to itself, slid out, wobbled a little in midair and then, with Grimes at the controls, set course for the further end of Lake Bluewater, from the surface of which a light mist, golden in the almost level rays of the morning sun, was lazily rising. The Lieutenant was already in his skin-tight suit, as was the remainder of the working party, but had yet to put on his helmet and flippers. The interior of the boat was crowded with men and gear, and there would have been little room to undress and dress. By his side, similarly attired, sat Chief Petty Officer Anderson, a big man, grossly fat until you looked at him more closely and realized that the fat was solid muscle. Baldheaded, baby-faced, he was peering intently at the submerged metal indicator that had been installed on the work boat's control console. He looked up from the instrument, said, "If I were you, Mr. Grimes, I'd run to the end of the lake and then come back in short sweeps." It was a suggestion, not an order, but when a C. P. O. suggests to even a senior officer the words carry weight.

Grimes replied, cheerfully enough, "I'll do just that, Chief."

He reduced thrust, lost altitude as he approached the beach, so that the boat would make its run barely clear of the surface of the water.

"If I were you, Mr. Grimes, I'd keep her up. That way we get a better spread on the detector beam. Once we've found the wreck we can come down for finer location."

"All right, Chief." *And*, thought Grimes, *what the hell do we have officers for? To carry the can back, that's all.*

Slowly, steadily, the boat grumbled its way out over Lake Bluewater. There were not, Grimes was relieved to see, any early morning swimmers or water-skiers. An audience he could do without, especially when such an audience would have with it a horde of watchbirds. He had good reason to dislike those robotic guardian angels.

To the end of the lake flew Grimes, toward the clump of screw pines that backed the sandy beach. "Anything yet, Chief?" he asked Anderson.

"No, sir." Then, in a reproachful voice, "You should have released the marker buoy, Mr. Grimes."

"I didn't know that we had one."

"I installed it myself, Mr. Grimes." Anderson was the ship's expert, rated and paid as such, in submarine operations.

"Why wasn't it an automatic release?" demanded the Lieutenant.

"Come, sir. You know better than that." The intonation made it quite clear that in the speaker's opinion Grimes didn't. "What if you make a crash landing on some hostile planet, in the sea, and don't want to give the potential enemy a chance to pinpoint your position? And hadn't you better watch those trees, sir?"

"I am watching them." Slowly Grimes turned the boat, started his sweeps back and forth across the width of the lake.

"Now!" exclaimed Anderson. "That's it, sir, I think. Bring her down, if you don't mind . . . Stop her. Now, back a little. Slowly, sir, slowly. Right a little . . . Stop her again. Cut the drive."

Gently, making only the slightest of splashes, the work boat settled to the surface. With the drive shut down it was suddenly very quiet. The air drifting in through the open windows carried a faint, refreshing tang of early morning mist. One of the ratings in the after compartment muttered, "This is a bit of all right. We should have brought fishing tackle."

Anderson turned his head, "You'll have all the fishing you want, Jones. It's a big, tin fish we've come to catch."

The men who knew what was good for them laughed.

"There are goldfish in the lake," contributed Grimes. His remark was received in silence. He shrugged. "All right, Chief. I'll go down to make the preliminary inspection. I'll let you know when I need help."

"Have you had your antibend shot, sir?" asked Anderson in a way that implied that all officers have to be wet-nursed, junior officers especially.

"Yes, Chief. Now, if somebody will help me on with my helmet . . ."

Anderson himself picked up the transparent sphere, lowered it

carefully over Grimes' head, connected up the air pipes to the shoulder tank. The speaker inside the helmet said tinnily, "Testing, sir. Testing. Can you read me?"

"Loud and clear." The Lieutenant eased himself up from his chair, sat on the ledge of the open window, his back to the water. "Flippers," he said.

He saw Anderson speaking into the microphone that somebody had handed him. "If I were you, sir, I'd go down on the line."

"Just what I am doing, Chief. But I'll wear my flippers just the same."

Anderson strapped the large fins on to his bare feet, then made a thumbs-up gesture. Grimes replied in kind, leaned far back and then let himself fall. He knew that this unorthodox method of entering the water would not please the C. P. O. and, even as he hit the surface with a noisy splash, heard, through his helmet speaker, Anderson admonish the men, "Just because an officer does it that way you're not to. See?" The failure to place a hand over the microphone was probably deliberate.

He hit the water and, at once, started to sink. With his equipment and the disposable weights at his belt he had negative buoyancy. He looked up at the shimmering mirror that was the surface, broken by the black hull of the boat. Using his hands and feet he turned about his short axis until he was upright, saw the weighted line, pale-gleaming in the blueness. One tentative kick took him toward it. He grasped the rough-textured cord with one hand and hung there for a little while to get his bearings, to become acclimatized.

"Are you all right, Mr. Grimes?" It was Anderson, giving his famous imitation of a mother hen.

"Of course I'm all right, Chief."

The water was cool, but far from cold. And there was the exhilarating sensation of weightlessness. It was like being Outside in Free Fall but better, much better. There was the weightlessness but not the pressing loneliness, the dreadful emptiness. And the skin-tight suit was almost as good as nudity, did not, as did space armour, induce the beginnings of claustrophobia.

Grimes looked down.

Yes, there was the wreck, her canopy gaping open like the shell of some monstrous bivalve. Grimes hoped that it was not too badly damaged by the ejection; if it were not so, the task of sealing the ruptured hull would be much easier. Up through the gaping opening drifted a school of gleaming, golden fish. And that was a good sign; it meant that nothing larger and dangerous, even to Man, had taken up residence.

He relaxed his grip on the cord, felt it slide through his hand as he dropped slowly. Then, raising a flurry of fine silt, his flippered feet were on the bottom. He was about three yards from the sunken dynosoar.

"Calling C.P.O. Anderson," he said into the built-in microphone. "Making preliminary inspection." He heard the acknowledgement.

Clumsily at first, he swam the short distance. For several minutes he checked the canopy. Yes, it could be forced back into place and, where too badly buckled, welded over. If necessary, lines could be sent down from the boat to lift the valves to an upright position before their closure. Satisfied, he swam aft, closely inspecting the fuselage as he did so. He could find no damage on the upper surface; the damaged skin must be on the underside, buried in the silt. An air hose to blow the muck clear? Yes, but would it be necessary? After all, when expelled from the hull by air under pressure the water would have to have somewhere to go to, somewhere to get out from, and whatever holes there were in the plating could have been designed for that very purpose.

"Chief!"

"Yes, Mr. Grimes?"

"Tell your men to have the welding gear and the compressor and hoses ready. Then come down yourself as soon as you can."

"Coming, sir."

Something made Grimes look up. The big C. P. O. was already on his way, falling like a stone, weighted by the gear that he was grasping in both of his huge hands. Behind him trailed two of the air hoses and another cable, the power line of the welding equipment. Using his flippered feet only he controlled his descent, made a remarkably graceful landing not far from where Grimes was standing.

"And what do you have in mind, Mr. Grimes?" he asked.

"Get the canopy shut and sealed, Chief. Might run an air hose in at that point. Then blow her out, and up she comes."

"Up she comes you hope, sir. Or she'll blow up, with the internal pressure. Explode, I mean."

"There are holes in the fuselage aft, the holes through which the water entered in the first place."

"Then we have to seal them, Mr. Grimes."

"That shouldn't be necessary, Chief. As far as I can see, they're on the bottom of the hull."

"Very good, sir. But what if she topples? If I were you, I'd seal those holes and fit 'em with non-return valves."

"You aren't me. And don't forget that the brute was designed to fly this way up. Surely she'll *float* this way up."

Stiffly, "I'm not qualified in aerodynamics, sir."

"But you are in hydrodynamics. All right, then. Do you think she'll topple once she starts to lift?"

Anderson, leaving the tool case and the weighted ends of the hoses with Grimes, swam slowly around the wreck. "No," he admitted when he returned. "She shouldn't topple." He stayed by the fore end of the dynosoar, stood in the silt and tried to lift one of the parts of the open canopy. It moved but with extreme reluctance. Grimes heard the man, a massive, black-glistening giant in his suit, grunt with effort.

"I thought of running lines down from the boat," he said.

"And pull the boat over, or under? No, sir. That wouldn't do at all."

No, thought Grimes. It wouldn't. Not if he hoped to get any shore leave on this planet.

"We'll have to cut the flaps and then weld them back into place."

"Now you're talking, sir. With your permission?" he asked, then paused.

"Of course. Carry on, Chief."

"Jones, Willoughby, Antonetti. Down here, on the double. Bring the cutting torches, a bundle of sheeting and that bundle of metal strip. Jump to it!"

"And a spear gun," added Grimes. "If we have one." He had a feeling that the knife at his belt would be inadequate. Helplessly, he looked at the huge, silvery torpedo shape that was approaching them, that was staring at them from glassy eyes as big as dinner plates.

Then, even through his helmet, he heard the muffled whirring of machinery and laughed. "Don't worry, Chief," he said. "Just remember what the Captain told us all and comport yourself like a gentleman. You're on camera."

Chapter 13

After a while Grimes decided to leave the frogmen to it. It was obvious that Anderson and his team knew what they were doing. The Lieutenant had tried to lend a hand; he had realized quite soon that any attempt at supervision by himself would lead only to confusion, but the C. P. O. had made it quite plain, without actually saying so, that he was just being a bloody nuisance. So he said, in his best offhand manner, "Carry on, Chief. I'll take a dekko at this submarine camera of theirs. Let me know if you want me."

"That'll be the sunny Friday!" he heard somebody mutter. He could not identify the voice.

He put the busy scene—the flaring torches, the exploding bubbles of steam, the roiling clouds of disturbed silt—behind him, swam slowly toward the robot midget submarine. And was it, he wondered, called a watchfish? At first he thought that the thing was ignoring him; its two big eyes remained fixed on the salvage operations. And then he noticed that a small auxiliary lens mounted on a flexible stalk was following his every movement. He thumbed his nose at it, the rude gesture giving him a childish satisfaction.

Then he swam on lazily. He should, he realized, have brought a camera with him. One of Anderson's team had one, he knew; but he knew, too, that all the footage of film would be devoted to the raising of the dynosoar. Shots of the underwater life of this lake would have made an interesting addition to *Aries'* film library. More than a score of worlds must have contributed their share of fresh water fauna. There were graceful shapes, and shapes that were grotesque, and all of them brightly colored. Some were fish and some were arthropods and some—he mentally christened them "magic carpets"—defied classification. And there were plants, too, a veritable subaqueous jungle that he was approaching, bulbous trunks, each crowned with a coronal of spiky branches. If they *were* plants. Grimes decided that he didn't like the look of them, changed course and paddled toward a grove of less menacing appearance, long green ribbons stretching from the muddy bottom to just below the silvery surface. Among the strands and fronds flashing gold and scarlet, emerald and blue, darted schools of the smaller fishes. And there was something larger, much larger, pale and glimmering, making its slow way through the shimmering curtains of waving water weed. The Lieutenant's right hand went to the knife at his belt.

It, whatever it was, was big. And dangerous? It wasn't a fish. It had limbs and was using them for swimming. It undulated gracefully

through the last concealing screen of vegetation, swam towards Grimes.

It was a woman.

It was, he saw without surprise (now that the initial surprise had passed) Marlene von Stolzberg.

He looked at her. She was wearing a scuba outfit not unlike his own, with the exception of the skintight suit. Her own golden skin was covering enough. And she was carrying what looked like a spear gun, although it was much stubbier than the weapons of that kind with which he was vaguely familiar.

He said, "Dr. Livingstone, I presume . . ."

He saw a frown darken her mobile features, clearly visible in the transparent helmet. From his own speaker came her voice, "That was neither original nor funny, Mr. Grimes." Then, as she saw his expression of astonishment, "It wasn't much trouble for us to find out what frequency you people are using."

"I suppose not. Your Highness."

"I hope, Mr. Grimes, that you don't mind my engaging in my usual activities. I promise to keep well clear of the salvage operations."

"It's your lake," he said. "And you don't seem to have any watchbirds with you this time."

"No," she agreed. "But . . ." She gestured with a slim arm. Grimes saw, then, that she was not alone, that she was attended by two things like miniature torpedoes. The analogy came into his mind, like a shark with pilot fish. But she was no shark, and pilot fish are mere scavengers.

They hung there in the water, silent for awhile. Grimes found that it was better for his peace of mind to concentrate his regard upon her face. She said at last, "Shouldn't you be looking after your men?"

"Frankly, Your Highness, they can manage better without me. Chief Petty Officer Anderson and his team are experts. I am not."

"You're not very expert in anything, Mr. Grimes, are you?" A grin rather than a smile robbed her words of maliciousness.

"I'm a fairish navigator and a better than average gunnery officer."

"I'll have to take your word for that. Well, Mr. Grimes, since the work seems to be going along very well without you, will you accompany me in a leisurely swim?"

"Cor stiffen the bleedin' crows, Chiefie," remarked an almost inaudible voice, "officers don't half have it good!"

"Watch your welding, Willoughby," came Anderson's reprimand. "That's all that *you're* good for."

There was a gusty sigh, and then, "Well, I suppose we can't *all* be fairish navigators and better than average gunnery officers . . ."

Grimes wished that he were wearing only a breathing mask and not a full helmet. The cool touch of water would have soothed his burning face. He heard the girl's light, tinkling laughter. But he knew that Anderson would deal with matters back at the wreck. And he knew, too, that the petty officer would never report to higher authority that Grimes had wandered away from the work in progress. What was it that he, Anderson, had said once? "You'll be a captain, and higher, while I'm still only a C. P. O. Why should I make enemies?" Then, when asked why he, himself, did not put in for a commission, he had replied, "I like things the way they are. I enjoy reasonable standards of comfort and authority without responsibility. A junior officer has responsibility without authority."

The Princess Marlene was swimming away now, slowly. She paused, made a beckoning gesture. Should he follow? Yes. To hell with it, he would. He said, "Chief Petty Officer Anderson."

"Sir?"

"One of the . . . er . . . local ladies has offered to take me on an inspection of the lake bottom. It could be useful. Let me know when you want me."

"Very good, sir."

As Grimes followed the girl it was not the lake bottom that he was inspecting.

* * *

He caught up with her. One of the silvery miniature torpedoes dashed toward him threateningly, then suddenly (in response to a telepathic command?) sheered away. He said, "You have vicious pets, Your Highness."

"Not vicious, Mr. Grimes. Just faithful."

"That's an odd word to use about machines."

"These, like our watchbirds, are more than mere machines. They have organic brains. These pilot fish of mine, for example, are essentially the small but highly intelligent cetaceans of Algol III with mechanical bodies." She must have read his expression. "Come, come, Lieutenant. There's no need to look so shocked. This is no worse than the dog's brains used by your Psionic Radio Officers as amplifiers. Not so bad, in fact. Our watchbirds and watchdogs and pilot fish have freedom to move about in bodies which, in fact, are rather superior to their original ones."

"It's . . . it's not the same."

She laughed scornfully. "That's what I've been telling you, my good man. One of your poodle's brains in aspic would sell its soul for the motility enjoyed by our guardians."

"Is that what you call them?"

"That is the general term. Yes."

"And their prime function is to protect their owners?"

"Their only function. Yes."

"So if I . . . tried to attack you?"

"It would be the last thing you ever did, Mr. Grimes."

He laughed grimly. "I don't think I'll try it out, Your Highness."

"You'd better not. But would you like a demonstration?"

"Not on me."

She stopped, holding herself stationary in the water with gentle movements of her long, graceful limbs. She pointed with the hand holding the gun. "Look! Do you see the rock ogre?"

"The *what*? I see something that looks like a slime-covered rock."

"That's it. Perhaps the only really dangerous denizen of these waters. Native to Australis. Excellent eating, properly prepared. That's why we introduced it."

"It looks innocent enough."

"But it's not. Keep well back and watch closely."

She swam toward the thing. Then, with explosive suddenness, three triangular flaps sprang back on the top of the rough shell and, uncoiling with lightning rapidity, a thick stalk shot out straight at the girl, a glistening limb tipped with a complexity of writhing tentacles and gnashing mandibles. Grimes cried out in horror and pulled his useless knife, but he was not fast enough, could never have been fast enough.

The pilot fish were there before him, flashing past him at a speed that, even under the water, produced a distinct whine. One of them dived into the orifice from which the stalk had been extruded, the other attacked the ogre's head. It was over almost as soon as it had been begun. Mere flesh and blood, from whatever world, could not withstand the concerted onslaught of the little, armoured monsters. Only seconds had elapsed, and the girl was hanging there in the water, laughing, while the pilot fish frisked around her like dogs demanding an approbatory pat. An unpleasant, brownish mist was seeping up from the base of the stalk and from the debris of torn and severed tentacles, still feebly twitching, and broken mandibles at the head of it.

Grimes was sickened. It was not by the death of a dangerous (and, he had been told) edible creature, life owes its continuance to the destruction of life. It was by the genuine pleasure and amusement in the girl's high, clear laughter. But blood sports, he told himself dourly, have always been the favorite recreation of the so-called aristocracy.

He said, "I must be getting back to work. Your Highness."

He started off in what he thought was the right direction, but the

water was heavily befogged by the ichor from the dying rock ogre. He did not see the other rock, the shell, rather, until he was almost on top of it. He screamed and made a frantic effort to avoid the terrifying head that shot out at him. He felt a sharp pain in his side as something grazed his body, heard a dull *thunk* followed by another. The rock ogre seemed to go mad, writhing violently. The thick stalk caught Grimes a flailing blow in the belly, knocking him well clear. He caught a glimpse, vivid, unforgettable, of Marlene, an underwater Artemis, with her gun raised for another shot.

And then the pilot fish swept in to finish the job.

Chapter 14

He sprawled on the muddy bottom, his hand pressed to the rent in his suit, the rent in his skin. He could feel the warmth of blood. He did not know how badly he was injured, but, at this moment, the imminence of suffocation was of far greater importance than loss of blood. He feared that the pipes from his liquid air tanks to his helmet had been buckled or severed and then, agonisingly, he was able to breathe again. It was the blow to the stomach that had knocked all the air out of his lungs.

She was hanging in the murky water looking at him, her stubby weapon pointing directly at him. A woman with a gun can be a frightening sight; a naked woman with a gun is always clothed in deadly menace.

Grimes whispered hoarsely, "Put that down!"

At first he thought that she had not heard him, then, slowly, she let her hand fall until the muzzle, from which protruded the lethal head of a new dart, was directed downward.

She muttered, "I'm sorry . . ."

Grimes tried to laugh. "What for? You saved my life."

"Yes." There was an odd note of astonishment in her voice. "Yes. I did, didn't I?" She made a swimming motion toward him. "Are you hurt?"

"I don't know how badly. That brute kicked like a mule. And one of your bolts grazed me. At least, I think it was only a graze."

"Mr. Grimes, sir," came Anderson's voice. "Mr. Grimes, what's been happening? Shall I send help?"

"Just a slight tussle with the local fauna, Chief. I got a little beaten up, but nothing serious. I'm on my back to the wreck now."

"If I were you, sir, I'd surface and get back into the boat. I'll send Jones up to you. He's qualified in First Aid."

"Better do as the man says," advised the Princess. "I'll see you to your boat. Can you move?"

Grimes worked his arms and legs experimentally. "Yes. Nothing seems to be broken."

He detached the weights from his belt, let his buoyancy carry him upward. The girl floated alongside him. He could not help looking at her. She was beautiful in her nudity, and the few black trappings that she wore accentuated the golden luminosity of her skin. She was beautiful, but he shuddered as he remembered how she had appeared in her moment of bloodthirsty triumph, and how she had stared at him over her aimed weapon.

The silver mirror shattered into a myriad of glittering shards, and then Grimes' head was above the surface. He could not see the boat at first, turned slowly and clumsily in the water until she came into view. She was a long way off. He was, he knew, in no danger of drowning but doubted if he could swim that far in his weakened condition. And he did not know how much blood he was losing, or how fast.

She said softly, "Relax, Mr. Grimes. Let me see . . ."

He felt her alongside him, was conscious of her gently probing fingers, was aware that she had widened and lengthened the tear in his suit.

"Men are such babies," she remarked. "The skin's hardly broken."

He said stiffly, "I hope that your darts aren't poisoned."

"Of course not. And now, just follow me."

He followed her, thinking that it was the first time in his life that he had followed a girl, a naked girl at that, without a sense of pulse quickening anticipation.

* * *

He sat there glumly in the boat, dabbing the graze just below the ribs on his right side with antiseptic-soaked cotton wool. The Princess Marlene had helped him to mount the short ladder and then had left him, swimming away toward the further shore, a graceful, golden shape around which sported the two silver pilot fish. His self-administered first aid was interrupted by the man Jones, stocky, competent, revoltingly cheerful, who, as soon as he had clambered inboard, removed his helmet and tanks and then performed a like service for Grimes.

"Now, let's have a look at that, sir. Something bite you? Only a scratch, though. All the same, you'd better have an antibiotic shot. We don't know what microorganisms are in the water, do we? And perhaps whatever it was that attacked you didn't brush his or her teeth this morning. Ha, ha!"

"Ha, ha," echoed Grimes.

"No need to take your suit off for the shot, sir. I'll just pump it in where the fabric's already been torn away." He went to the first aid box and produced a syrette. "Now, sir, just stretch a little . . . Fine. Didn't feel a thing, sir, did you?"

"No," admitted Grimes.

"Then if you're all right, sir, I'll get aft and start the compressor." He reached across the Lieutenant and picked up the microphone. "Jones here, Chiefie. I've seen to Mr. Grimes; he's all right. O. K. to start pumping the air into her?"

"O. K.," came Anderson's voice. "She's all sealed and I think she'll hold. But stand by to stop the compressor at once if I give the word."

"Will do, Chiefie."

Jones left the seat by Grimes' side, made his way toward the stern. After a second or so came the steady throb of the machine; Grimes, looking overside, saw one of the heavy plastic hoses jerking rhythmically, as though alive. It reminded him unpleasantly of a rock ogre's trunk.

"She's holding," announced the Chief Petty Officer. Then, "Mr. Grimes, can I have a word with you, sir?"

"Yes, Chief?" replied Grimes into the microphone.

"She's holding all right. And, as you said, those holes aft are just made to order for blowing the water out of . . . I think she's starting to lift . . . Yes. May I suggest, sir, that you and Jones take in the hose as she comes up, in case she topples . . . Oh, yes, and tell Jones to stop the air pump. Now."

The compressor stopped. Grimes joined the rating where the hoses ran overside, helped him to bring the one that had been used inboard. It was heavy work, and soon both men were sweating uncomfortably under their skintight suits. Then Jones shouted, "There she blows!"

Yes, thought Grimes, she did look something like a whale as she broke surface, although she wasn't blowing. And then, around her, bobbed up the heads of Anderson and his men in their spherical helmets. The Lieutenant saw the petty officer's mouth moving; it seemed odd that his voice should be coming from the speaker in the boat. "Jones! Throw us a line, will you?"

Jones picked up a coil of light nylon cord, with a padded weight spliced to the end, heaved it expertly— and even more expertly Anderson raised a hand to catch it. What followed was a pleasure to watch, was seamanship rather than spacemanship. A heavier line was passed, made fast to a ringbolt that had been welded to the dynosoar's nose, the other end of it taken by Jones to the towing bitts that had been installed at the boat's stern. And then, one by one, the Chief Petty Officer last of all, the salvage crew clambered back on board, stripping off their helmets and flippers, hauling to the surface their tools and other equipment. The competent Anderson insisted on checking every item before he was satisfied. Not until then did he lower his big frame into the seat beside Grimes.

"If I were you, sir, I'd tow her in and beach her by the spaceport."

"I'll do just that, Chief."

"Feel up to handling the boat yourself, sir?"

"Of course. It was only a scratch I got, and a few bruises."

"Right you are, then, Mr. Grimes."

Grimes started up the inertial drive, lifted the boat about a foot

clear of the water. He turned her, slowly and carefully, avoiding the imposition of any sudden strain on the towline. He headed for the spaceport beacon inshore from the beach. He realized that he was scanning the water for any sign of the Princess Marlene. But either she had left the lake and gone home—wherever home was—or was still disporting herself in its depths. But she could look after herself, he thought grimly. She could look after herself very well indeed, she and her murderous pilot fish.

He heard Anderson mutter something uncomplimentary and concentrated on his steering; the boat, with that sluggish weight pulling her stern down, was behaving rather oddly. But he got the hang of it and beached the re-entry vehicle without incident.

* * *

He sat with Anderson in the boat while the men busied themselves about the stranded dynosoar.

"If I'd been you, sir," said the Chief Petty Officer, "do you know what I'd have done?"

About *what*? wondered Grimes. About the salvage? About the rock ogres? About Her Highness the Princess Marlene von Stolzberg?"

"What would you have done?" he snapped.

"I'd have had the engineers waterproof an I. D. unit, complete with power cells, taken it down to the dynosoar, started it up—and Bob's your uncle!"

"He may be yours, Chief. But he's obviously not mine."

"But the way it was was all right, Mr. Grimes. It gave my boys some very useful training."

"Join the Interstellar Survey Service and see the bottom of the sea."

"I must remember that, sir. And that's the way that I wish it always was. But . . . Do you mind if I talk to you man to man, for a little?"

"Do just that."

"I know Captain Daintree. Well. He was an Ensign when I was a rating fourth class, before I started specializing. We've sailed together many a time."

"Go on."

"I won't talk. And the men won't talk. If they did, they'd know that all the Odd Gods of the Galaxy wouldn't be able to save 'em. From me. You officers think that you have power, but"—he slowly opened and then clenched a huge hand—"this is where the real power lies, in any Navy."

"Go on."

"Your report, sir. May I suggest that you tore your suit on a piece

of jagged wreckage?"

"But why, Chief?"

"You were supposed to be in charge of the job, Mr. Grimes. The Captain won't like it if he hears that you went off with a girl." Anderson blushed incongruously. "A *naked* girl, at that."

"You've got a dirty mind, Chief."

"I haven't," said Anderson virtuously. "But the Old Man, I beg your pardon, sir, the Captain, and some of the other officers mightn't be so broadminded as me . . ."

Grimes chuckled.

"It's not funny, sir."

"Perhaps not. But your double entendre was."

"Yes, it was," admitted the C. P. O. complacently. "I must remember *that*, too . . . But what I'm getting at is that you should edit, or censor, your report on the operations rather carefully. The torn suit, for example, and the jagged projection . . ."

"Thank you, Chief. But no. I can't do it."

"If you knew the bloody liars that I've known that are Admirals now!"

"But they, Chief, didn't have a robot midget submarine sniffing around and recording everything. I've no doubt that whoever sent it will be willing to run the film for Captain Daintree. I'm afraid I have to tell the truth."

Anderson did not look happy. Grimes could imagine what was running through his mind. The petty officer, he knew, was concerned about him, but he would not be human if he were not also concerned about himself. Grimes could almost hear Daintree's voice. "And what were you thinking of, Chief Petty Officer Anderson, to allow a young, inexperienced officer to wander off alone in waters in which all sorts of dangerous creatures might have been—were, in fact—lurking? Not alone, you say? Even worse, then. In the company of a young lady who has already demonstrated her criminal irresponsibility."

"Yes," said Grimes. "I can edit my report."

"But this submarine camera you mentioned, sir . . ."

"We'd started work on the salvage, Chief, and then Her Highness came along and told me about the dangers on the lake bottom, such as the rock ogres. I thought that I'd better see one for myself so that I'd be able to identify them. Not only did she show me one but also persuaded it to give a demonstration of its capabilities. The demonstration was almost too effective . . ."

"Yes, Mr. Grimes. That should do, very nicely." He grinned. "You'll make Admiral yet."

"I hope so," said Grimes.

Chapter 15

She came to pick up Grimes the following afternoon, her blue and scarlet air car bringing itself down to a perfect landing hard by the main ramp of *Aries*. Daintree, rather to the Lieutenant's surprise, had granted him shore leave, but, at the same time, had made it quite clear that he was doing so only because Grimes had somehow—"and only the Odd Gods of the Galaxy know how!" swore the Captain—contrived to make powerful friends on this strange world. So Grimes, clad in the regulation go-ashore rig that was almost a uniform—slate gray shirt with the golden S embroidered on the breast, matching shorts and stockings, highly polished black shoes—marched down the gangway, a grip in either hand, In the bags, in addition to his toilet gear, he had packed changes of clothing, of some of which Daintree would not have approved. Too, he should have obtained official permission to take from the ship the deadly little Minetti automatic pistol which, together with spare clips of ammunition, was concealed among his shirts. Over his right shoulder was slung a camera, over his left shoulder a tape recorder. "The complete bloody tourist!" Lieutenant Commander Cooper had remarked when he encountered Grimes in the airlock.

But Grimes did not mind. He had decided a long time ago that, much as he liked ships, he did not like big ships. It would be good to get away from *Aries* for a few days or even, with luck, longer. It would be good to eat something better than the mediocre fare served up in the officers' mess. It would be good to be able to wear clothing not prescribed by regulations.

The door of the air car, a fragile-seeming, beautifully designed machine, a gay, mechanical dragonfly, adorned with nonfunctional fripperies, opened as Grimes approached it. The Princess Marlene raised a hand in casual greeting. She was dressed today in a flimsy green tunic, the hem of which came barely to mid-thigh. On her slender feet were rather ornate golden sandals. Her hair was pulled back to a casual (seemingly casual) pony tail. She smiled, said, "Hi!"

"Your Highness," replied Grimes formally.

"Throw your gear in the back, then get in beside me.

"Will your watchbirds mind, Your Highness?" asked Grimes, looking up, rather apprehensively, to the two circling guardian angels.

"Not to worry, Mr. Grimes. They've been told that you're a member of the family, acting, temporary . . ."

"Unpaid?"

She smiled again. "That all depends, doesn't it? But jump in."

Grimes didn't jump in. This contraption seemed of very light construction compared to the ugly, mechanized beetles to which he was accustomed. He got in, watching carefully where he put his feet. He lowered himself cautiously into the cushioned seat. The door slid shut.

"Home," ordered Marlene.

There was a murmur of machinery and the thing lifted, took a wide sweep around the ship, then headed in a direction away from the distant city.

"And now," said the girl, "what do they call you?"

"What do you mean, Your Highness?"

"To begin with, Lieutenant, you can drop the title, as long as you're my guest. And I want to be able to drop yours." In spite of the friendliness of her voice and manner, the "for what it's worth" was implied, although not spoken. "I don't know what planet you were born and dragged up on, but you must have some other name besides Grimes."

"John, Your . . ."

"You may call me Marlene, John. But don't go getting ideas."

I've already got them, thought Grimes. *I got them a long time ago. But I have no desire to be the guest of honor at a lynching party.*

"Cat got your tongue, John?"

"No. I was . . . er . . . thinking."

"Then don't. Too much of it is bad for you. Just relax. You're away from your bloody ship, and all the stiffness and starchiness that are inevitable when the common herd puts on gold braid and brass buttons."

You snobbish bitch! thought Grimes angrily.

"Sorry," she said casually. "But you have to remember that we, on El Dorado, regard ourselves as rather special people."

"That reminds me," said Grimes, "of two famous Twentieth Century writers. Hemingway and Scott Fitzgerald. Fitzgerald said to Hemingway, quite seriously, 'The rich are different from us.' Hemingway replied, 'Yes. They have more money.' "

"So you read, John. You actually read. A spacefaring intellectual. I didn't know that there were any such."

"There are quite a few of us, Marlene. But microfilmed editions aren't the same as *real* books."

"You'll find plenty of real books on this world. Every home has its library."

"You've room here, on this world."

"There's room on every planet but Earth for people to live as they should. But your average colonist, what does he do? He builds cities

and huddles in almost exact replicas of Terran slums."

"You aren't average?"

"Too bloody right we're not. And we were determined when we purchased El Dorado that overpopulation would never become one of our problems. But . . ."

"But?"

"But once people start dying, that will be the start of the reverse process . . ." Then a laugh dispelled her somber expression. "However did we get started on this morbid subject? And what sort of hostess am I?" Her voice suddenly became that of the guide of a conducted tour. "Slightly ahead, and to our right, you will see the Croesus Mines. They constitute the only fully automated mining operation in the Galaxy . . ."

Grimes looked. There was nothing to indicate the nature of the industrial process. There were no roads, no railways, no towering chimneys, no ugly pithead gear. There was only a low, spotlessly white building in a shallow green valley.

"Everything," the girl went on, "is subterranean, including the rail communication with our few factories and with the spaceport. We do not believe in ruining the scenery of our planet while there is ample space underground for industry. Now, coming up on our left, we see the Laredo Ranch. It is not as fully automated as it might be, but you must understand that Senator Crocker, the owner, enjoys the open air life. It irks him, he says, that he must use robot cowboys for his roundups; but that, on this world, is unavoidable . . ."

Grimes, looking out and down, saw a solitary horseman riding toward a herd of red-brown cattle. Crocker, he supposed, making do without his despised mechanical aides.

"Count Vitelli's vineyard. His wines are not bad, although they are only a hobby with him. There is some local consumption and considerable export. Most of *us*, of course, prefer imported vintages."

"You would," said Grimes sharply.

She looked at him in a rather hostile manner, then grinned. "And you, John, would say just that. But this is *our* world. We like it, and we can afford it."

"Money doesn't always bring happiness, Marlene."

"Perhaps not. But we can be miserable in comfort."

"Luxury, you mean."

"All right, luxury. And why the hell not?"

To this there was no answer. Grimes stared ahead, saw on a hilltop a grim, gray castle that was straight out of a book of Teutonic mythology. "Your *Schloss*?" he asked.

"My *what*?" She laughed. "Your pronunciation, my dear. You'd

better stick to English. Yes, that is Castle Stolzberg, and in the forests around it I hunt the stag and the boar."

"Is that all you do?"

"Of course not. As you know very well I am fond of aquatic sports. And I am serving my term on the Committee of Management."

"And who lives there with you?"

"Nobody. I entertain sometimes, but at the moment I have no guests. With the exception, of course, of yourself."

"And you mean to tell me that that huge building is for one person?"

"Isn't it time that you started to lose your petty-bourgeois ideas, John? I warn you, if you start spouting Thorsten Veblen at me on the subject of conspicuous waste I shall lose my temper. And as for Marxism, there just isn't any exploited proletariat on El Dorado, with the exception of the lower deck ratings aboard *your* ship."

"They aren't exploited. Anyhow, what about the people on the other worlds who've contributed to your fantastically high standard of living?"

"They were happy enough to buy us out, and they're happy enough to buy our exports. And, anyhow, you're a spaceman, not a politician or an economist. Just relax, can't you? Just try to be good company while you're my guest, otherwise I'll return you to your transistorized sardine can."

"I'll try," said Grimes. "When in Rome, and all the rest of it. I shall endeavor to be the noblest Roman of them all."

"That's better," she told him.

Slowly, smoothly, the air car drifted down to a landing in the central courtyard, dropping past flagpoles from which snapped and fluttered heavy standards, past turrets and battlemented walls, down to the gray, rough flagstones. From somewhere came the baying of hounds. Then, as the doors slid open, there was a high, clear trumpet call, a flourish of drums.

"Welcome to Schloss Stolzberg," said the girl gravely.

Chapter 16

"Welcome to Schloss Stolzberg," she said, and suddenly, for no immediately apparent reason, Grimes remembered another girl (and where was she now?) who had told him, "This is Liberty Hall. You can spit on the mat and call the cat a bastard." He could not imagine the Princess Marlene using that expression, no matter how friendly she became. And Castle Stolzberg did not look, could never look like Liberty Hall. If there were no dungeons under the grim (or Grimm, he mentally punned) pile, there should have been.

He got out of his seat, stepped to the ground, then helped the girl down. Her hand was pleasantly warm and smooth in his. She thanked him politely and then turned her head to the car, saying, "We shan't be needing you again. You can put yourself to bed."

A gentle *toot* from somewhere in the vehicle's interior replied, and it lifted smoothly, flew toward a doorway that had suddenly and silently opened in the rough stone wall.

"My bags . . ." said Grimes.

"They will be taken to your room, John. Surely, by this time, you have come to learn how efficient our servitors are."

"Efficient, yes. But they've given *me* enough trouble, Marlene."

"They were doing the jobs for which they were designed. But come."

She put her hand in the crook of his left arm, guided him to a tall, arched doorway. The valves were of some dark timber, iron studded, and as they moved on their ponderous hinges they creaked loudly. Grimes permitted himself a smile. So the robots who ran this place weren't so efficient after all. Even a first trip deck boy would have known enough to use an oil can without being told.

Marlene read his expression and smiled in reply, a little maliciously. "The doors *should* creak," she said. "If they didn't, it would spoil the decor."

"Talking of noises . . . Those rowdy dogs we heard when we landed . . . Also part of the decor, I suppose. And was all that baying a recording?"

"Part of the decor, yes. As for the rest, real hounds in real kennels, I told you that hunting was one of my amusements."

"And where do you keep the vampire bats?"

"You improve with acquaintance, John. But this is not Transylvania."

They were in the main hall now, a huge barn of a place, thought Grimes. But he corrected himself. A barn, when empty, can be a little

cheerless; when full its atmosphere is one of utilitarian warmth. This great room was cheerless enough, but far from empty. Only a little daylight stabbed through the high, narrow windows, and the flaring torches and the fire that blazed in the enormous fireplace did little more than cast a multiplicity of confused, flickering shadows. Ranged along the walls were what, at first glance, looked like armoured men standing to rigid attention. But it was not space armour; these suits, if they were genuine (and Grimes felt that they were), had been worn by men of Earth's Middle Ages. By men? By knights and barons and princes, rather; in those days the commonality had gone into battle with only thick leather (if that) as a partial protection. And then had come those equalizers—long bow and crossbow and the first, cumbersome firearms. Grimes wondered if any of this armour had been worn by Marlene's ancestors, and what they would think if they could watch their daughter being squired by a man who, in their day, would have been a humble tiller of the fields or, in battle, a fumbling pikeman fit only to be ridden down by a charge of iron-clad so-called chivalry. *Grimes, you're an inverted snob,* he told himself. He shivered involuntarily as he thought that he saw one of the dark figures move. But it was only the shifting fire and torchlight reflected from dull-gleaming panoply and broadsword. But he looked away from it, nonetheless, to the antique weapons high on the walls, then to the dull, heavy folds of the ancient standards that sagged heavily from their shafts.

He said, "A homey little place you have here."

It was, of course, the wrong thing. Marlene did not think the remark at all funny. She said icily, "Please keep your petty bourgeois witticisms for your ship."

"I'm sorry."

She thawed slightly. "I suppose that the castle *is* home, but never forget that it is history. These stones were shipped from Earth, every one of them."

"I thought that you came from Thuringia."

"Yes, I did. But we're all Terrans, after all, if you go back far enough. And that's not very far."

"I suppose not."

She led him across the hall, past a long, heavy banqueting table with rows of high-backed chairs on either side. She took a seat at the head of it, occupied it as though it were the throne it looked like. In her scanty, flimsy attire she should have struck a note of utter incongruity, but she did not. She was part of the castle, and the castle was part of her. Like some wicked, beautiful queen out of ancient legend she seemed, or like some wicked, beautiful witch. The pale skin of her bare limbs was luminous in the semi-darkness, and her

body, scarcely veiled by the diaphanous material of her dress, only slightly less so.

She motioned Grimes to the chair at her right hand. He was amazed to find that it was extremely comfortable, although the wood, at first, was cold on the backs of his legs. He wondered what subtle modifications had been made to the archaic furniture, and at what expense. But he hadn't had to pay the bill. He saw that a decanter of heavy glass had been set out on the table, and with it two glittering, cut crystal goblets. Marlene poured the dark ruby wine with an oddly ceremonial gesture.

She said matter-of-factly, "Angel's blood, from Deneb VII. I hope you like it."

"I've never tried it before." (*And that's not surprising*, he thought, *at the price they charge for it, even on its world of origin.*) "But does it . . . er . . . match the decor?"

Surprisingly she smiled. "Of course, John. In the old days, when the prince and his knights feasted here, there were delicacies from all over the then known world on this table . . ."

Salt beef and beer, thought Grimes dourly, remembering his Terran history.

"To . . ." she started, raising her glass. "To . . . to your stay on this world"

She sipped slowly and Grimes followed suit. The wine was good, although a little too sweet for his taste. It was good but not good enough to warrant a price of forty credits a bottle, Duty Free and with no freight charges.

* * *

Away from the gloomy main hall, the rest of the castle was a surprise. Spiral staircases that had been converted into escalators—rather a specialty of El Doradan architectural engineering—spacious apartments, light, color, luxury, all in the best of taste, all in the best of the tastes of at least five score of worlds. At last Marlene showed Grimes into the suite that was to be his. It was a masculine apartment, with no frills or flounces anywhere, almost severe in its furnishings but solidly comfortable. There was a bar, and a playmaster with well-stocked racks of spools and a long shelf with books, real books. Grimes went to it, took from its place one of a complete set of Ian Fleming's novels, handled it reverently. It was old, but dust jacket, cover, binding and pages had been treated with some preservative.

"Not a First Edition," the girl told him, "but, even so, quite authentic Twentieth Century."

"These must be worth a small fortune."

"What's money for if not to buy the things you like?"

There was no answer to that, or no answer that would not lead to a fruitless and annoying argument.

She said, "Make yourself at home. I have a few things to attend to before I change for dinner. We dine, by the way, at twenty hundred hours. In the banqueting hall."

"Where we had the wine?"

"Where else?" She paused in the doorway that had opened for her. "Dress, of course."

Of course, thought Grimes. He decided that in these surroundings his uniform mess dress would be the most suitable. He looked for his bags so that he could unpack. He could not find them anywhere. A disembodied voice said, "Lord, you will find your clothing in the wardrobe in your bedroom."

His clothing was there, hung neatly on hangers, folded away in drawers. But of the Minetti pistol and its ammunition there was no sign.

"Damn it!" he swore aloud, "where the hell's my gun?"

"It will be returned to you, Lord, when you leave the castle. Should Her Highness wish you to accompany her on a boar hunt, a *suitable* weapon will be provided."

Suitable? A Minetti, used intelligently, could kill almost any known life form.

"I'd like my own weapon back," snapped Grimes.

"For centuries, Lord, it has been the rule of this castle that guests surrender their weapons when accepting its hospitality. We are programmed to maintain the old traditions."

"It's a good story," said Grimes. "Stick to it."

In an atmosphere of mutually sulky silence he went to the bar and poured himself a Scotch on the rocks, without too many rocks.

Chapter 17

Slowly, savoring its expensive aroma and smoothness, Grimes finished his Scotch. He poured himself a second glass, being more generous this time with the ice. He let it stand on the glass top of the bar, prowled through the apartment. He considered leaving it to explore the castle, but decided that this would be one sure and certain way of incurring the Princess Marlene's hostility. He found a window that had been concealed by heavy drapes, stared out through it. His quarters were high in the building, must be just under the battlemented roof, but as the casement could not be opened he was not able to stick his head out to confirm this. For long minutes he looked out at the scene—the wooded hills, the green valleys, the silvery streams, over which poured the golden light of the afternoon sun. Earth born and bred as he was, he found himself pining for the sight of another human habitation, of a road with vehicles in motion, of a gleaming airliner in the empty sky.

He returned to the sitting room, examined the catalogue of playmaster spools that stood by the machine. It was comprehensive, fantastically so, putting to shame the collection of taped entertainment available in *Aries'* wardroom, or in any of her recreation rooms. There were the very latest plays and operas, and there were recordings of films that dated back to the dawn of cinematography. There was too much to choose from. Fleming, perhaps? A screened version of one of the 007 novels? Grimes had read them all during his course in English Literature at the Academy and, although his tastes had been considered somewhat odd by his fellow students, had enjoyed them. A title in the catalogue, CASINO ROYALE, caught his eye. He pressed the right sequence of buttons.

The playmaster hummed gently and its wide screen came to glowing life. Grimes stared at the procession of gaudy credits, then at the initial scene depicting the meeting of the two agents in the *pissoir*. Surely this was not James Bond as he had been described by the master storyteller, as he had been imagined by his reader. And then, a little later, there was Sir James Bond, dignified in his mansion with its lion-infested grounds. Grimes gave up, settled down to enjoy himself.

Suddenly, annoyingly, the screen went blank. It was just as Mata Bond had been snatched by the scarlet-uniformed Horse Guardsman, who had galloped with her up the ramp of an odd-looking spacecraft. Grimes got up from his chair to investigate. As he did so, that smug mechanical voice remarked, "Lord, I regret that there is no time for you to witness the end of this entertainment. If you are to perform

your ablutions and attire yourself fittingly before escorting Her Highness to dinner, you must commence immediately."

Grimes sighed. After all, he had not become the Princess's guest to spend all his time watching films, no matter how fascinating. He went through to the bedroom, shed his clothing, and then into the bathroom. It operated on the same principle as the one in the spaceport's accommodation for transients. When he came out, he found that somebody (something?) had removed the clothes that he had intended to wear from the wardrobe, disposed them neatly on the bed. He resented it rather; why should some complication of printed circuits or whatever take it upon itself to decide that he, a man, would be correctly attired for the occasion only in gold braid, brass buttons and all the trimmings?

He shrugged, thought, *Better play along*. He got into his underwear, his stiff white shirt, his long, black, sharply creased trousers with the thin gold stripe along the outer seams. He carefully knotted the bow tie, wondering who, with the exception of officers in the various services, ever wore this archaic neckwear. The made-up variety lasted far longer and looked just as good, if not better. He put on his light, glistening black shoes. He got into his white waistcoat, with its tiny gilt buttons, and finally into the "bum-freezer" jacket, on the breast of which were three miniature medals. Two of them were for good attendance, the third one really meant something. ("It will be either a medal or a court martial," the Admiral had told him. "The medal is less trouble all round.")

There was a knock at the outer door of the apartment. "Come in!" he called. He was expecting the Princess; surely the mechanical servitors, whatever they looked like (he had imagined something multi-appendaged, like an oversized tin spider) would not knock. The door opened and a man entered. No, not a man. Humanoid, but nonhuman, nonorganic. No attempt had been made to disguise the dull sheen of metal that was obvious on the face and hands. He (it?) was attired in a livery even more archaic than Grimes' uniform: white stockings and knee breeches over silver-buckled shoes, a black, silver-buttoned claw-hammer coat, a froth of white lace at the throat. An elaborately curled white wig completed the ensemble. The face was as handsome as that of a marble statue, and as lifeless. The eyes were little glass beads set in pewter. Nonetheless, the gray lips moved. "Lord, Her Highness awaits you."

"Lead on, MacDuff."

"My name, Lord, is not MacDuff. It is Karl. Furthermore, Lord, the correct quotation is, 'Lay on, MacDuff.'"

"Lead on, anyhow."

"Very well, Lord. Please to follow."

It was like a maze, the interior of the castle. Finally the robot conducted Grimes along a gallery, the walls of which were covered with portraits of long dead and gone von Stolzbergs. Men in armour, men in uniform, they glowered at the spaceman; and those toward the end, those with the Crooked Cross among their insignia, seemed to stir and shift menacingly in their ornate frames. Grimes suddenly remembered his Jewish grandmother and could just imagine that proud old lady staring fiercely and contemptuously back at these arrogant murderers. And there were the von Stolzberg ladies. He didn't mind looking at them, and he had the feeling that they didn't mind looking at him. Although the earlier ones tended to plumpness, many of them had something of the Princess Marlene in their appearance, or she had something of them in hers.

A door at the end of the corridor silently opened. Karl stood to one side, bowing. Grimes went through.

The room beyond it was brightly lit, opulent, but in its furnishings there were glaring incongruities. Weapons, however beautifully designed and finished, look out of place on the satin-covered walls of a lady's *salon*. But they caught Grimes' attention. As a gunnery specialist he could not help looking at the firearms: the heavy projectile rifles, the lighter but possibly deadlier laser guns, the peculiar bell-mouthed weapons that, in a bad light, would have been antique blunderbusses but which, obviously, were not.

"I like to have my toys around me, John," said the Princess.

"Oh, yes. Of course." Grimes felt his ears burn. He turned to face her. "I . . . I must apologize, Marlene. My . . . er . . . professional interest was rather ill-mannered."

"It was, but understandable. Although not many people can appreciate the aesthetic qualities of well-made weaponry." She added, "I'm glad that you can, John."

"Thank you."

"Sit down, unless you would rather stand."

He sat down, looking at his hostess as he did so. She was different, far different, from the naked water nymph of his first acquaintance, but still the heavy folds of her brocaded, long-sleeved, high-necked gown could not quite conceal the fluid beauty of the limbs and body beneath the golden glowing fabric. Her pale hair, platinum rather than gold in this light, was piled high on her head, and in it rather than on it was a bejewelled coronet. Yes, those weapons were beautiful, but she, too, was beautiful.

And in the same way?

"Some sherry, John?"

Her slender hand went to the slim decanter that stood on the

lustrous surface of the low table between them, removed the stopper. She poured the pale wine into two glittering, fragile glasses. She raised hers, smiled, inclined her head slightly. It was more of a formal bow than a mere nod.

Grimes did his best to follow suit. They both sipped.

"An excellent Tio Pepe," he commented gravely. She need never know that it was the only wine that he could identify easily.

"Yes," she agreed. "But why put up with second best when you can import the best?"

And was there some hidden meaning in this seemingly innocent remark? But she, of all people, would never admit that any inhabitant of El Dorado was inferior to any offworlder.

"Will you take a second glass with me, John?"

"I shall be pleased to, Marlene."

Again they drank, slowly, gravely. And then, when they were finished, she extended a long, elegant arm toward him. There was an uncomfortable lag until he realized the implication of the gesture. His ears (inevitably) reddening, he got hastily (but not, he congratulated himself too hastily) to his feet, assisted her from her deep chair. Saying nothing, moving with slow grace, she contrived to take charge of the situation. Grimes found himself advancing with her toward the door, her right hand resting in the crook of his left arm. Grimes was sorry that there was not a full-length mirror in which he could see his companion and himself. The doorway gaped open as they approached it. There stood the robot Karl, bowing deeply. There stood four other humanoid robots, in uniform rather than in livery, attired as foot soldiers from some period of Earth's barbaric past. Each of them held aloft a flaring torch. All the other lights in the long corridor had been extinguished.

Slowly, in time to a distant drumbeat, they marched along the gallery—Karl, then two of the torch-bearers, then Grimes and the Princess, then the remaining pair of robots. Past the portraits they marched, past the men in the uniform of the Thuringian Navy (a service that had been disbanded after Federation), past the men in the uniforms of the armed and punitive forces of the Third Reich, past the commanders of mercenaries and the robber barons. There was a sense of uneasy menace. How much of the personality of the sitter survived in the painted likeness? There was a sense of uneasy menace, but the von Stolzberg women smiled encouragingly from within their frames.

They came to a wide stairway. Surely it had not been there before. They came to the broad flight of steps, with ornate wrought-iron balustrades that led down into the fire-lit, torch-lit hall. The drums were louder now, and there was a flourish of trumpets. It was a pity that this effective entrance was wasted on the handful of serving

robots that stood to attention around the long table. Grimes wished that his shipmates could witness it.

They descended the stairs, Karl still in the lead, walked slowly to the massive board. Ceremonially, the major-domo saw to the seating of Marlene; one of the lesser serving robots pulled out a chair for Grimes at her right hand. Then, suddenly, all the torches were somehow extinguished, and the only light was that from the blazing fire and from the score of candles set in an elaborately Gothic wrought-iron holder.

There was more wine, poured by Karl.

There was a rich soup served in golden bowls.

"Bisque of rock ogre," said Marlene. "I hope you like it."

Grimes, remembering the monster that had almost killed him, was sure that he would not but, after telling himself that a lobster, or even a prawn, would be a horrendous monstrosity to a man reduced to the size of a mouse, decided to try it. It was good, the flavor not unlike that of crayfish, but different. A hint of squid, perhaps? Or, just possibly, turtle? And then there was a roast of wild boar, and to accompany it a more than merely adequate Montrachet. To conclude the meal there was fresh fruit and a platter of ripe cheeses, with a red wine from Portugal, from grapes grown on the banks of the Douro.

Marlene said, "I like a man who likes *real* food."

Grimes said, "I like a woman who likes *real* food."

The robot Karl filled their coffee cups, offered a box of Panatellas to the Princess, who selected one carefully, and then to Grimes, who took the first one to hand. And then—it was a delightfully outré touch—a jet of intense white flame appeared at the end of Karl's right index finger. He carefully lit the Princess's cigar, and then the spaceman's.

"The brandy, Karl," said Marlene, through a cloud of fragrant smoke.

"The Napoleon, Your Highness? "

"You know as well as I do that it has no more connection with the Emperor of the French than . . . than Lieutenant Grimes has. But . . . Oh, very well, then. The Napoleon."

To Grimes it was just brandy, but he had no cause for complaint.

"And what would you like to do now?" asked the Princess.

Grimes did know but could not muster up the courage to state his desire.

"Oh, yes," said the girl after an uncomfortable pause. "I told you, I think, that I am a member of the Committee of Management. Would you be interested in finding out what that entails? "

"Yes . . ." answered Grimes dubiously.

Chapter 18

Before its fantastically costly dismantling and transportation Schloss Stolzberg had been well equipped with what, in the Middle Ages, were regarded as finest modern conveniences. Now not even a hole in the ground somewhere in Germany marked the site of these dungeons and torture chambers; where the Castle had once brooded stood a towering block of apartments. But still there were subterranean galleries and spaces: wine cellars, storerooms, and the Monitor Vault.

"It is our obligation as members of the Committee of Management," explained the Princess, "to watch. And we, even during our tenure of office, know that we can be watched . . ."

"You mean that there's no privacy?" asked Grimes, shocked.

"I Suppose that you could put it that way."

"But . . . But I thought that this was a society, of . . . aristocratic anarchists."

"That's a good way of putting it, John. And a true way." She lay back in the chair set before the huge screen, relaxed, but with her fine features thoughtful. "But, can't you see?, neither the aristocrat nor the anarchist suffers from false shame. I can conceive of situations in which a petty bourgeois such as yourself would be agonizingly embarrassed if he knew that he was being watched. During copulation, for example or defecation. But *we* . . ." In spite of her almost supine position she managed a delicate shrug. "But *we* . . . We *know* that it doesn't matter."

"But why this body of elected, I suppose that you are elected, Big Brothers? And Big Sisters."

"El Dorado," she told him, "could be a Paradise. But there are snakes in every Eden. When such a snake is found, he is placed aboard a small, one-man spacecraft, with whatever personal possessions he can pack into two suitcases, and a Universal Letter of Credit that will allow him sufficient funds to make a fresh start elsewhere. He is then sent into exile."

"Have there been many such cases?"

"Since the foundation of the colony, several. About a dozen."

"I'm surprised that none of these deportees has talked. Their stories, sold to newspapers and magazines throughout the Galaxy, would bring in enough to maintain them in luxury for the rest of their lives."

She smiled. "Somebody must *know* what happens, but quite a few of us suspect. After all, not much engineering skill would be required

to convert a perfectly functioning ship into a perfectly functioning time bomb."

"I suppose not. But tell me, Marlene, just what does anybody have to do to get slung off this, insofar as you all are concerned, perfect world?"

"There was one man who still lusted for power, direct, personal power. Working in secret he tried to form a Party, with himself as Leader, of course, on the same lines as the old Fascist and Communist Parties" She almost whispered, "I was lucky not to have been involved. Anyhow, *he* went. And there was another man . . . We still have the record. I'll show you."

She made a slight gesture with her right hand. There was the slightest of humming noises, a hesitant click, and then misty forms and colors swirled in the depths of the big screen, slowly coalesced. And there was sound, too, a woman's voice screaming, "*No! Please! No!*"

Horried, yet obsessed by a fascination of which he was afterwards bitterly ashamed, Grimes stared at the picture. It showed the interior of a cellar, and there was a naked girl, her body dreadfully elongated, stretched out on a rack, and a pale, fat slug of a man, stripped to the waist, in the act of taking a white-hot iron from a glowing brazier.

Suddenly there was an ingress of men and women, all of them armed, one of them carrying a bell-mouthed pistol like the ones Grimes had seen in Marlene's room. The report, when it was fired, was no more than a soft *chuff*. At once the torturer was trapped, enmeshed in a net of metal strands that seemed to be alive, that working with a sort of mechanical intelligence bound his hands and arms and legs and feet, swiftly immobilizing him. He fell against his own brazier, and the others left him there while they attended to his victim. Grimes could see the smoke and the steam that rose from his burning body, could hear his wordless screams (until the net somehow gagged him), thought (although this could have been imagination) that he could smell charred flesh.

The screen went blank.

"And who was that?" asked Grimes, with feeble, cheap humor. "The Marquis de Sade?"

"No. Oddly enough, a Mr. Jones from New Detroit."

"And did he . . . die?"

"Probably. But not on El Dorado."

"And how did you suspect?"

"Oh, we *knew*. But his first victims were collaborators more than martyrs, and he did them no permanent damage. And that girl, for

example, was experiencing nothing worse (or better?) than a mild, sexually stimulating whipping. However, the Monitor sees all, knows all, and gave the alarm, but on the rare occasions that arrests are necessary we prefer that they be made by ourselves, not by robots."

"But if your Monitor is so highly efficient, why the human Big Brothers?"

"We monitor the Monitor. That first man I told you about, the would-be dictator, almost succeeded in subverting it."

"I'm not sure that I'd like to live here, Marlene."

"I'm not sure that we'd have you, John, at least not until you've made your first billion or produced cast-iron documentary evidence of a family tree going back to Adam. Or both." But the words were spoken without malice. "And now, John, would you like to see how your lords and masters are behaving themselves?"

"No," he should have said.

"They are guests at the Duchess of Leckhampton's masked ball—the Captain and Surgeon Commander Passifern."

"That sounds innocuous enough," he said, disappointed.

Again there was the languid wave of her slim hand, again there was the coalescing swirl of light and form and color. Again there was sound, distorted at first, that reminded Grimes of Ravel's *Waltz Dream*. But it was not Ravel that poured from the concealed speakers when the picture clarified; it was Strauss, rich, creamy, sensual, unbearably sweet, and to it the dancers swayed and glided over the wide, wide expanse of mirror floor, and in the background there was red plush and gilt, and overhead blazed and sparkled the crystalline electroliers.

Grimes stared, shocked, incredulous.

Crinolines and hussars' uniforms would have added the final touch but not, relieved (accentuated) only by masks and sandals and jewellery, nudity.

And yet . . .

He shifted uneasily in his seat, acutely conscious of his telltale ears. He muttered, "Surely not the Old Man and the Chief Quack . . ."

And then, as though the Monitor had heard his words (perhaps it had), he was looking directly at Captain Daintree and Commander Passifern. The two officers were not among the naked dancers. They were seated at a table against the wall, stiff and incongruous in their dress uniforms. With them was a lady, elderly, elaborately clothed, one of the few people on this world of perpetual youth and near immortality showing her age and not ashamed of it. There was a silver ice bucket, bedewed with condensation; there were three goblets in which the wine sparkled.

Fascinated, Grimes stared at the faces of his superiors. Daintree—

he would—was playing the part of the disapproving puritan, his mouth set in a grim line. But his eyes betrayed him, flickering avidly, almost in time to the music, as the nude men and women swirled past. Passifern was more honest, was making no pretence. A shiny film of perspiration covered his plump features. There was more than a suggestion of slobber about his thick lips.

"Your Grace," he muttered, "I . . . I almost wish that I could join them."

The old lady smiled, tapped the Doctor on the arm with her fan. "Naughty, naughty, Commander. You may look but you mustn't touch."

"I wish that I could . . ." sighed Passifern, while Daintree glared at him.

The scene shifted again to an overall view of the ballroom. The scene shifted and, once more, the music seemed to Grimes to carry the subtle discordancies of Ravel's distortion of the traditional Viennese waltz.

The scene faded.

"Decadent," whispered Grimes to himself. "Decadent."

"Do you think so, John?" asked the Princess. She answered herself, "Yes, I suppose that it is. But erotic stimulation carried to extremes is one of the ways that we have tried to deal with our . . . problem. And there are other ways . . ."

Although the screen was still dark, from the speakers drifted a throb and grumble of little drums. Gradually there was light, faint at first then flaring to brilliant reds and oranges. It came from a fire and from torches held aloft by white-robed men and women. It grew steadily brighter, illuminating the clearing in the forest, in the jungle, rather. It shone on the altar, on the squatting, naked drummers, on the rough-hewn wooden cross that stood behind the altar, its arms thrust through the sleeves of a ragged black coat, a band of white cloth, like a clerical collar, where a human neck would have been, the whole surmounted by a battered black hat.

Grimes was an agnostic, but this apparent blasphemy shocked him. He turned to look at the girl. "John!" she whispered, "if you could only see your face! That cross is the symbol of a religion at least as valid as any of the others. It represents Baron Samedi, the Lord of Graveyards. But watch!"

A huge man, black and glistening, was bowing before the altar, before the . . . the idol? He was bowing low before the altar and the frightening effigy of Baron Samedi. He straightened, and Grimes saw that he carried a long, gleaming knife in his right hand. He turned to face the celebrants. His eyes and his teeth were very white in his

ebony face. Grimes recognized him, saw that it was the Hereditary Chief Lobenga. Lobenga, the exile from New Katanga, the dabbler in black magic, in voodoo.

The enormous Negro called, his voice a resonant baritone, "De woman! Bring out de woman! "Prepare de sacrifice!"

"The woman!" a chorus of voices echoed him. "The woman!"

And while the drums throbbed and muttered, a figure, wrapped in an all-enveloping black cloak and hood, was led to the altar by four of the white-robed worshippers. Their clothing made it impossible for Grimes to determine their sex, but he thought that two of them were men, two of them women. Lobenga faced the victim, towering over her. She seemed to cringe. His left hand went out to her throat, did something, and as the stuttering of the drums rose to a staccato roar, her cloak fell away from her. Beneath it she was naked, her flesh gleaming golden in the fire-lit darkness, her hair reflecting the ruddy flames.

She did not resist. As Lobenga moved to a position directly behind the altar, between it and the cross, she allowed herself to be led forward and then, quite willingly it seemed, lay down upon the dark, gold-embroidered altar cloth. She was beautiful of face, her body perfectly formed. Even in this supine posture her breasts did not sag. She was young, or was she? On this world, thought Grimes, she could be any age at all.

Lobenga had raised his knife. Above the now-muted drums rose the voices of the communicants. "The sacrifice! The sacrifice!"

Grimes was half out of his seat. "Marlene! What's your bloody Monitor doing about it? What are *you* doing?"

"Be quiet, damn you!" she snarled.

"The sacrifice!" cried the people on the screen.

And those about the altar laid hands upon the girl, one to each ankle, one to each-wrist, spread-eagling her.

"The sacrifice!"

"De white goat!" shouted Lobenga, knife upraised.

The white goat . . . the goat without horns . . .

"Marlene!" Grimes' hand was on her arm. "Marlene, we must *do* something. Now. Before it's too late."

She shook him off. "Be quiet!"

And suddenly there was a white goat, bleating, struggling. Two men threw the animal on its side to the ground, grasping its feet, lifting it. They set it down on the girl's naked body, its back to her breasts and belly, its head between her legs. The drums throbbed softly, insistently. The priest's knife swept down; the animal's cries ceased in mid-bleat, although its now released limbs kicked

spasmodically. The girl, free herself from restraining hands, held the dying body to her.

The drums were clamorous now, ecstatic, yet maintaining a compelling rhythm. All over the clearing men and women were throwing aside their white robes, had begun to dance, to prance, rather, and there was no doubt as to what the outcome would be. Lobenga had lifted the blood-spattered woman off the altar, was carrying her into the darkness. The way that her arms were twined about his neck was proof of her willingness.

"I think," said Grimes, "that I'm going to be sick."

"Karl will escort you to your quarters," said Marlene.

As he walked unsteadily through the doorway of the Monitor Vault he looked back. The girl was still staring raptly into the screen.

Chapter 19

Not surprisingly he dreamed that night, when at last he fell into an uneasy sleep.

There was the nightmare in which naked women and huge white goats, erect on their hind legs, danced to the music of Ravel's *Waltz Dream*, while across the mirror floor, scattering the dancers, stalked Baron Samedi.

There was that other dream, even more frightening.

It seemed that he half woke up but was unable to stir a muscle, to open his eyes more than the merest slit. There was a strange, acridly sweet smell in the air. There were low voices of a man and a woman. He could just see them, standing there by his bed. He thought that, in spite of the darkness, he could recognize them.

"Are you sure?" asked the woman.

"I am sure," replied the man. Although there was now no trace of accent, that deep, rolling baritone was unmistakable. "The white goat."

"The goat without horns." Then, "But I do not like it."

"It must be done."

"Then do it now. Get it over with."

"No. The . . . conditions must be right. You do know enough about these matters."

"After what I watched on the Monitor, I am not sure that I want to know any more than I know already."

"But you watched."

"Yes. I watched."

"Did he?"

"Some of it."

"Come." The larger of the two figures was already out of range of Grimes' vision.

"All right."

And then both of them were gone, and Grimes slept deeply until morning.

Chapter 20

He was awakened by the inevitable disembodied voice calling softly at first, then louder, "Lord, it is time to arise . . ."

It took a considerable effort to force his gummy eyelids open. His head was fuzzy, his mouth dry and stale-tasting. The uneasy memory of that last nightmare persisted.

There was a condensation-clouded glass on the table beside his bed. He picked it up in a rather shaky hand, drained it gratefully. The chilled, unidentifiable fruit juice was tart and refreshing. After it he began to feel a little better.

"And what's on today, I wonder?" he muttered, more to himself than to any possible listener.

"You will perform your ablutions, Lord," replied the irritating unseen speaker. "Then you will partake of breakfast. And then you will join Her Highness at the hunt." There was a pause. "And would you care to place your order for the meal now?"

"What's on?" asked Grimes, feeling faint stirrings of appetite.

"Anything that you may desire, Lord."

"No stipulations about 'reasonable orders'?"

"Of course not, Lord." The voice was mildly reproachful. "As a guest of Schloss Stolzberg you may command what you will."

"As a Lord, acting, temporary, unpaid, you mean. It was a different story when I was a mere spaceman. But you wouldn't know about that, would you?"

There was the suggestion of a smirk in the reply. "Lord, to the Monitor all things are known."

"Are you part of the Monitor, then?"

"I am not permitted to answer that question, Lord."

"Oh, all right. Skip it. Now, breakfast. A pot of coffee, black, hot and strong. Sugar, but no milk or cream. Two four-minute eggs. Hens' eggs, that is. Plenty of toast. Butter. Honey."

"It will be awaiting you, Lord."

Grimes went through to the bathroom, performed his morning ritual. When he came out, in his dressing gown, he noted that clothing had been laid out on the already made bed. He looked at it curiously; it was nothing that he had brought with him, but he had no doubt that it would prove a perfect fit. His breakfast was waiting on the table in the bedroom, and with it a crisp newspaper. THE ELDORADO CHRONICLE he read as he picked it up. Curious, he skimmed through it over his first cup of coffee. It contained little more than social gossip, although its editor had condescended to notice the presence of

Aries at the spaceport, and there were even some photographs of the ship's personnel. Grimes chuckled over one of Captain Daintree and Surgeon Commander Passifern at the Duchess of Leckhampton's masked ball, at another one that showed a conducted party of the ship's ratings, looking acutely uncomfortable in their uniforms, at an ocean beach on which the rig of the day was the only sensible one for swimming, and sunbathing. He found a brief item which informed anybody who might be interested that Lieutenant Grimes was the house guest of the Princess Marlene von Stolzberg. On the back page there was Galactic news, but most of it was financial.

Grimes put the paper down and applied himself to his breakfast, which was excellent. After one last cup of coffee he went back to the bedroom and examined curiously the heavy shirt, the tough breeches, the thick stockings and the heavy boots before putting them on. A tweed cap completed the ensemble. He was admiring himself in the mirror when, unannounced, Marlene came in. He removed his hat, turned to look at her. She was dressed as he was, but on her the rough clothing looked extremely feminine.

He said, "Good morning, Marlene."

She said, "Good morning, John." Then, "I trust that you slept well."

"Yes," he lied.

"Good." Her mood seemed to be that of a small girl setting out on a long-promised outing. "Then shall we make a start? The woods are so much better in the morning."

"Your tin butler said something about a hunt."

"Yes. There is a boar, a great, cunning brute that I have promised myself the pleasure of despatching for many a day."

"I don't know anything about hunting."

"But you must. As an officer of an armed service you must, at times, have been a hunter—and, at times, the hunted."

"That's not quite the same."

"No. I suppose it's not. Didn't somebody say once that Man is the most dangerous game of all?"

"But I'm not sure that I approve of blood sports."

She was amusedly contemptuous. "John, John, you typical Terran petty bourgeois! You approved of that roast of wild boar at dinner last night. And that animal was killed by *me*, not in some sterile, allegedly humane abattoir. There is a big difference between killing for sport and mere butchering."

"You could be right."

"Of course I'm right. But come."

She led the way out of Grimes' quarters. He supposed that, given

six months or so, he would eventually learn to find his way about this castle, but this morning he certainly needed a guide. At last, several corridors and a couple of escalators later, he followed her into a panelled room at ground level, against the walls of which were stacks of weapons: light and heavy firearms, longbows and, even, spears.

One of these latter she selected, a seven-foot shaft, of some dull-gleaming timber, tipped with a wickedly sharp metal head. She tested the point of it on the ball of her thumb, said, "This will do. Select yours."

"A *spear*?" demanded Grimes, incredulous.

"Yes, a spear. What did you expect? A laser cannon? A guided missile with a fusion warhead? Wars were fought with these things, John, once upon a time. Fought and won."

"And fought and lost when the other side came up with bows and arrows."

"The boar only has his tusks. And hooves."

"And he knows how to use them." Grimes deliberately handled his spear clumsily, making it obvious that this was one weapon that *he* did not know how to use.

"Just stay with me," she told him. "You'll be quite safe."

Grimes flushed but said nothing, walked with her out of the castle into the open air.

* * *

It was a fine morning, the sun rising in a cloudless sky, the last of the dew still on the grass, the merest suggestion of a pleasantly cool breeze. Grimes found himself remembering the possibly mythical upper-class Englishman who was supposed to have said, "It's a beautiful day. Let's go out and kill something." So it was a beautiful day for killing wild boars, and last night (that memory suddenly flooded back) had been a beautiful night for killing white goats. He shivered a little. A boar hunt would be clean, wholesome by comparison. And, he had to admit, there was a certain glamor about sport of this kind, cruel though some might consider it.

He looked at the hounds, their pelts boldly patterned in ruddy brown and white, streaming ahead of them in a loose pack. They were silent now, although they had belled lustily when released from their kennels. They were part of the countryside, part of this kind of life. And so was Marlene, striding mannishly (but not too mannishly) beside him. Even the two humanoid robots, tricked out in some sort of forester's livery, each carrying a bundle of spears and one of those bell-mouthed net-throwing pistols, were more part of the picture than he, Grimes, was. Even the inevitable pair of watchbirds, hovering and soaring overhead, looked like real birds, fitted in.

There was no need for a path over the grass, something had kept it cropped short. But as they approached the woods Grimes saw that there was a track through the trees, made either by human agency or by wild animals. But the hounds ignored it, split up, each making its own way into the green dimness. They gave voice again, a cacophonous baying that, thought Grimes uneasily, must surely infuriate rather than frighten any large and dangerous animal. But they seemed to know what they were doing, which was more than he did.

He remarked, "Intelligent animals, aren't they?"

"Within their limitations," she replied. "They have been told to find a wild boar, *the* wild boar, rather, and drive him toward us. And they have enough brains to keep out of trouble themselves."

"Which is more than I have."

"You can say that again. Hold your spear at the ready, like this. The way you're handling it he could be on you, ripping your guts out, before you got the point anywhere near him."

"If your watchbirds let him."

"They can't operate in a forest, John." She grinned. "But Fritz and Fredrik"—she made a slight gesture towards the robot foresters—"have very fast reactions."

"I'm pleased to hear that."

They were well into the woods now, on either side of them the ancient oaks (artificially aged? imported as full-grown trees?) and overhead the branches and thick foliage that shut out the blue of the sky. Things rustled in the underbrush. Something burst from the bushes and ran across their path. Instinctively, Grimes raised his spear, lowered it when he saw that the animal was only a rabbit.

"For *them*, John," remarked the Princess chidingly, "we have shotguns."

The baying of the hounds was distant now, muffled by the trees. Perhaps they wouldn't find the boar or, old and cunning as he was, he would not allow himself to be chivvied into the open. Grimes found himself sympathizing with the animal. As Marlene had surmised, he had been in his time both hunter and hunted. He knew (as she did not) what it was like to be at the receiving end.

The baying of the hounds was still distant but, it seemed, a little closer. "Stop," ordered the girl. "Wait here. Let him come to us."

I'd sooner not wait, thought Grimes. I'd sooner get out of this blasted forest as though I had a Mark XIV missile up my tail.

"Not long now," said the girl. The tip of her pink tongue moistened her scarlet lips. She looked happy. Grimes knew that he did not. He glanced at the foresters. They were standing there stolidly just

behind the humans. They had not bothered to unholster their net-throwing guns. The spaceman muttered something about brass bastards too tired to pull a pistol. "Don't *worry* so, John," the Princess told him. "Relax."

The clamor of the pack was louder and growing louder all the time. It was the only sound in the forest. All the little disturbing rustlings and squeakings and twitterings had ceased. Then there was a new noise, or combination of noises. It was like a medium tank crashing through the undergrowth, squealing as it came. And there was no fear in that high-pitched, nasal screaming, only rage.

"Open up," ordered the Princess. "Give him a choice of targets. It will confuse him."

There was room for them to spread themselves out in the clearing in which they were standing. Marlene, on his right, moved away from him. He could hear, behind him, the feet of the robots shuffling over the dead leaves and coarse grass. He stayed where he was. A shift to the left would bring him too close to the bushes, out of which the enraged animal might emerge at any moment. He thought, *What am I doing here?* He was no stranger to action, but a fire fight at relatively long range is impersonal. This was getting to be too personal for comfort.

And then, ahead of them, the wild boar exploded into the clearing. He stood there for what seemed a long time (it could have been only a second, if that) glaring at them out of his little red eyes. Here was no fat and lazy piglet leading a contented life (but a short one) in the very shadow of the bacon factory. Here was a wild animal, a dangerous animal, one of those animals that are said to be wicked because they defend themselves. The tusks on him, transposed to the upper jaw, would not have been a discredit to a sabre-toothed tiger.

He made his decision, charged at the Princess like a runaway rocket torpedo. She stood her ground, spear extended and ready and then, with a motion as graceful as it was horrible, with the sharp point deftly flicked out the brute's left eye. He was blinded on that side and she had skipped away and clear. He was blind on that side, but his right eye was good, and he could see Grimes and, furthermore, another spear licked out, wielded by one of the robots, not to kill but with the intention of turning him toward the new pain, toward the spaceman.

Grimes wanted to run but knew that he would never be fast enough. (The girl could look after herself, or, if she could not, her faithful automatic servitors would protect her.) He wanted to run, but stubbornness more than any other quality made him remain rooted to the spot. And then—he never knew why—he *threw* his spear. It was not a javelin, was not designed to be used in this manner but,

miraculously, sped straight and true, hitting the boar in the left shoulder, missing the bones, plunging through into the fiercely beating heart.

Even so, the animal almost reached him, finally collapsed at his very feet.

Slowly, Grimes turned to look at the others—at the Princess, at the robot foresters, at the grinning, tongue-lolling dogs. He felt betrayed, sensed that only his own luck (rather than skill) had saved him.

Marlene stared back, her eyes and wide mouth very vivid in her pale face. Then she made a tremulous attempt at a smile.

"Third time lucky," she said. "For you."

"What do you mean?"

"That I've shot *my* bolt. Somebody else can do the dirty work."

"What do you mean?"

"Never mind. Let us return to the castle."

In silence they walked back out from the dark woods.

Chapter 21

They lay, supine and naked, on the velvet grass of the lawn that surrounded the swimming pool, soaking up the warmth and the radiation of the afternoon sun. Grimes raised himself on his shoulders, looked at the perfect body of the girl. He thought, *Yes, you may look, but you mustn't touch.* And he wanted to touch, badly. Hastily he turned over onto his belly.

"What's bothering you, John?" she asked, her voice lazy.

Can't you see? he did not dare to say. Instead, extemporizing, he said, "I'm still puzzled by what you said. After I killed the boar."

"What did I say?"

"Something about third time lucky. And about somebody else having to do the dirty work." He was silent for a little. "And, tell me, was the first time when I brought the dynosoar in to a landing? And was the second time when we had the difference of opinion with the rock ogre?"

"I don't know what you're talking about, John. I can't remember saying anything about third time lucky."

"Can't you?"

"No. You must have imagined it. You were rather badly shaken up." There was a touch of scorn in her voice. "Still, I suppose that it was the first time that you'd ever killed anything at short range."

"Never mind that. Here's another point. I gained the impression that your precious Fritz and Fredrik weren't busting their tin guts to get me out of the jam."

"You hardly gave them time, did you? Also, they are not supposed to intervene until the last possible" moment. It's like . . . how shall I put it? It's like the amusement parks you have on most of the overcrowded planets. There are those affairs called . . . roller coasters? Big Dippers? Anyhow, they give their passengers the illusion of danger. We work on the same principle."

"So El Dorado is just one huge amusement park for the very rich?"

She laughed, but without warmth. "You could put it that way." She got up slowly, walked to the battlements. Grimes watched the play of the muscles under her smooth skin, the sway of her round buttocks. *Yes, he thought, a huge amusement park, with swimming pools on the roofs of Gothic castles, and the illusion of danger when you want it (and when you don't) and the illusion of glamorous sex. The real thing isn't for snotty-nosed ragamuffins from the wrong side of the tracks.*

She turned to face him. The sun was full on her. She was all golden, the slender length of her, save for the touches of contrasting

color that were her eyes, her mouth, her taut nipples and the enameled nails of her fingers and toes.

She said, "You aren't happy here, John." There was regret in her voice.

He said, looking at her, "You're a marvellous hostess. But . . . But I can't help feeling an outsider."

"But you *are*," she stated simply. "All of you, from your almighty Captain down to the lowest rating, are. We can fraternise with you all, but only within limits."

"And who lays down those limits? Your precious Monitor?" She was" shocked. "Of course not. We know what those limits are. Normally we just do not mix with those who are not our kind of people. But, as we called your ship in, we realize that we are under an obligation. In *your* case I am trying to make up for the trouble I got you into from the very start."

"And ever since," he said.

"That is not fair, John. You impressed me as being the type of young man who is quite capable of getting himself into trouble without much help or encouragement."

And this young woman has helped me enough, thought Grimes, *nonetheless*. Young woman? But was she? For all he knew she could be old enough to be his grandmother.

"Why are you staring at me, John?"

"A cat can look at a Queen," he quipped. "Or a Princess."

"And many a cat has lost all of its nine lives for doing just that."

Grimes transferred his attention to a tiny, jewelled beetle that was crawling over the grass just under his face.

She said, "If you aren't happy here, John, I'll take you back to your ship."

"Do you want me to go? "

"No," she said at last.

"All right. I'll stay, as long as you'll have me."

"That wasn't very gracious."

"I'm sorry. It was just my proletarian origins showing."

She told him, "Please don't let them show tonight. You must be on your best behavior. I, we, have guests."

"Oh. Anybody I know?"

"Yes. Henri, Comte de Messigny. Hereditary Chief Lobenga and his wife, the Lady Eulalia. The Duchess of Leckhampton. Those whom you have not already met you have seen."

"The Duchess? Yes. I remember now. On the Monitor, at the masked ball. But the Lady Eulalia?"

"At the voodoo ceremony. It was she on the altar."

"His wife?"

"Yes. Lobenga is a very moral man, moral, that is, by your somewhat outdated standards."

And that, thought Grimes, robbed the rites that he had witnessed of much of their sinful glamor. There had been, of course, that revolting business with the white goat but all over the Galaxy, with every passing second, animals were being slaughtered to serve the ends of Man. He, himself, had killed the boar and, quite possibly, sooner or later would enjoy its cooked flesh.

Suddenly he found himself pitying these people with their empty, sterile lives. Messigny, playing at being a spaceman, Lobenga and his wife playing at Black Magic, and the old Duchess casting herself in the role of Grande Dame. And the Princess? *There's nothing wrong with you*, he thought, *that a good roll in the hay wouldn't cure*. And yet, looking at her as she stood there, proud and naked, looking down at him, he knew that she would have to make the first move.

She said, "There is a slight chill in the air. Shall we go down?" She walked to the turret that housed the top of the escalator. He followed her. The robot Karl was awaiting them, helped the girl into a fleecy robe, knelt to slide golden sandals onto her slim feet. Grimes picked up his own robe from where he had left it, got into his footwear unassisted. He knew that had he waited a few seconds Karl would have served him as he served his mistress, but the spaceman was neither used to nor welcomed such attention. The moving stairway took them down into the castle.

* * *

Grimes, tricked out once again in his dress uniform, sat watching the screen of the playmaster in his living room, awaiting the summons. He had decided to allow himself just one weak drink, and was sipping a pink gin. He was ready for the knock on the door when it came, drained what was left in his glass and then followed Karl through long corridors that were, once again, strange to him. Finally, he was conducted into a room furnished with baroque splendor, in which Marlene and her guests were already seated.

They broke off their conversation as he came in, and the two men and the Princess got to their feet. "Your Grace," said Marlene formally, "may I introduce Lieutenant John Grimes, of *Aries*?" The Duchess looked him up and down. *If she smiles*, thought Grimes, *the paint will crack and the powder will flake off*. . . But smile she did, thinly, a final touch to the antique elegance already enhanced by an elaborate, white-powdered wig, black beauty spot on the left cheek of her face, black ribbon around the wrinkled neck, gently fluttering fan. She extended a withered hand. Rather to his own surprise, Grimes bowed from the waist to kiss it. She looked at him approvingly.

"Lady Eulalia, may I introduce . . . ?"

Grimes found it hard to believe that this was the naked woman whom he had seen stretched upon the altar, who had participated in the obscene sacrifice, who had been carried into the dark jungle by the giant Negro. She smiled sweetly, demurely almost, up at him. Her skin was hardly darker than Marlene's, and only a certain fullness of the lips betrayed her racial origin. Her auburn-glinting hair was piled high on her narrow head. Her splendid body was clad in a slim sheath of glowing scarlet. The effect was barbaric, and suddenly, credence restored, he could visualize her as she had appeared on the screen. He felt his ears burning.

"We have met before, young Grimes," said de Messigny, shaking his hand. Although the grip was firm, it was cold. The Comte was not in uniform tonight, was sombrely well-dressed in form-fitting black, with a froth of lace at throat and wrists. He, like the Duchess, seemed a survivor from some earlier, more courtly age.

"I remember seeing you at the spaceport, Lieutenant," rumbled Lobenga, a wide, dazzling smile splitting his broad, ebony face. The Hereditary Chief was wearing a white jacket over sharply creased black trousers and, under the white satin butterfly of his necktie, a double row of lustrous black pearl adorned his starched shirt front. "I am pleased with the opportunity to make your acquaintance properly." The hand that crushed Grimes' was the hand that had slain the sacrificial goat.

"Please be seated," ordered Marlene, resuming her own chair. She, tonight, was imperially robed in purple, and an ornate golden brooch—or was it some Order?—gleamed over her left breast. In her hair, as before, was the jewelled coronet. Grimes watched her as she sat down and was suddenly aware that de Messigny was watching him. Glancing sideways, he imagined that he detected jealousy on the tall man's face. *But you've nothing to be jealous of*, he thought.

And then the robot servitors were offering trays of drinks, and the conversation was light and desultory, normal—"And what do you really think of our world, Mr. Grimes?"

"The most beautiful planet I've seen, Your Grace,"—platitudinous, but a welcome change from the platitudes bandied about in *Aries'* wardrobe, and after a pleasant enough half hour or so it was time to go down to dinner.

Chapter 22

They partook of food and wine in the great banqueting hall, waited upon by the silent, efficient serving robots. Grimes—a young man keenly appreciative of the pleasures of the table, although he had yet to acquire discrimination—could never afterwards remember what it was that they ate and drank. There was food and there was wine, and presumably both were palatable and satisfying, but those sitting around the board were of far greater importance than what was set upon it.

Opposite Grimes was Marlene. On her left, darkly glowering, was Lobenga, and to his left was the Duchess. To Grimes' right was the Lady Eulalia, with de Messigny beyond her. The table should have been a little oasis of light and warmth in the huge, dark hall, a splash of color in contrast to the ranged suite of dull-gleaming armour, the sombre folds of the standards that sagged from their inward pointing staffs. It should have been, but it was not. It could have been imagination, but it seemed to Grimes that the candle flames were burning blue, and the fire in the enormous hearth was no more than an ominous smoulder. Somewhere background music was playing, softly, too softly. It could have been the whispering of malign spirits.

De Messigny, speaking diagonally across the table, said abruptly, "And are the ghosts of your Teutonic ancestors walking tonight, Marlene?"

She stared back at him, her face grave, shadows under her high cheekbones, what little light there was reflected from the jewels in her coronet, an unhappy princess out of some old German fairy story. She said at last, "The ghosts of Schloss Stolzberg stayed on Earth, Henri."

"Unfortunately," added Lobenga, his low rumble barely audible.

"And was the Castle haunted?" asked Grimes, breaking the uneasy hush.

They all turned to stare at him—the Princess gravely, Lobenga sullenly, the Duchess with a birdlike maliciousness. On his right Eulalia laughed softly and coldly, and de Messigny glared at him down his long, thin nose.

"Yes," said Marlene at last. "It was haunted. There was the faithless Princess Magda, who used to run screaming through the corridors, the hilt of her husband's dagger still protruding from between her breasts. There was Butcher Hermann, who met his end in the torture chamber at the hands of his own bastard son. There was S. S. General von Stolzberg, roasted in this very fireplace by his slave-labor farm workers when the Third Reich collapsed . . ."

"We could do without *them*," de Messigny stated.

"Hermann and the General, perhaps," cackled the Duchess. "But Magda would have been at home here." As she said this she ceased to be the Grande Dame, looked more, thought Grimes, like the Madam of a whorehouse.

"Yes," agreed the Comte. "She would have been." Had he not looked so long and hard at Marlene as he said it, the remark would have been inoffensive.

Eulalia laughed again. "I have often wondered why some men persist in attaching such great importance to the supremely unimportant." She shrugged her slim, elegant shoulders. "But, of course, Lobenga has no cause to worry about me. Not even on this world. Perhaps, Henri, we could enroll you in a course of study in the so-called Black Arts."

"That filth!" exploded this Comte.

"Sir," the huge Negro told him gravely, "it is not filth. We have seen, on this planet, what happens when Man gets too far away from the mud and blood of his first beginnings. Every member of the Committee of Management, with the exception of Lord Tarlton . . ."

"That *materialist*!" interjected his wife.

". . . agrees that we are on the right track. There is disagreement regarding which method to employ. Her Grace, for example, pins her faith in super-civilized but decadent orgies . . ."

"Thank you, Lobenga," said the old woman sardonically.

"On the other hand, Her Highness concurs with me that a sacrifice is necessary."

"Then," put in de Messigny, "why were not such few criminals as we have discovered on El Dorado executed *here*, instead of being sent to their deaths somewhere in outer space?"

"You heard what was said about Hermann von Stolzberg and his descendant, the S. S. General. We can do without such raw material."

"Rubbish!" The Comte's normally pale face was flushed. "Marlene carries in her veins the blood of her murderous ancestors. We all of us carry in our veins the blood of ancestors guilty of every crime—yes, and of every sin—known to Man."

"There has been a certain refining process," the Duchess told him.

"Perhaps that's the trouble. Perhaps we are all too refined. Or perhaps we have culminated in a new species of Mankind that is sterile."

The Duchess cackled. "That from you, Henri? I recall, just the other day, that you were telling me about your illegitimate children on Caribbea and Austral" Then, maliciously, "But are you sure that they are yours?"

"There is a strong family resemblance," he snapped.

"And so, Henri, you alone on El Dorado are capable of the act of procreation. Why don't you . . ."

"I didn't mean it that way, Honoria."

"We have a guest," Marlene reminded the others.

"And so we have," agreed de Messigny, tossing down almost a full glass of wine. "Or so *you* have. But we must not offend Mr. Grimes' delicate susceptibilities, although I am sure that an officer of the Survey Service will be able to take the rough with the smooth." He managed to make the last word sound obscene.

"Henri. You know very well that that would be entirely contrary to the rules by which we live."

"You have always made your own rules, Marlene. As we all, at this table, know."

"As we all know," stated Lobenga.

"That is my privilege," she said. "As it is the privilege of all on El Dorado."

"But you told us," complained the Duchess, "that you would, for the good of us all, cooperate. Cooperate, did I say? As I recall it, you were to play a leading part in one of the schemes."

"I did," said Marlene. "I did. But we von Stolzberg's have a family tradition. Shall I tell you? Try to do something, and fail. Try a second time, and fail. Try a third time, and fail. Try a fourth time, and the consequences are unforeseen and disastrous."

"Superstition," growled the Hereditary Chief.

"This from *you*, Lobenga . . ." murmured the Princess.

"The Old Religion is *not* superstition!" flared Eulalia. "If we had been allowed to do things *our* way . . ."

"We still can," said her husband.

"But not," stated the Princess, "in Schloss Stolzberg. I am fully conscious of the obligations of a host."

"Mr. Grimes!" It was the Duchess of Leckhampton addressing him. Then, sharply, "Mr. Grimes!"

He turned to her, still bewildered by the conversation in which he had played no part, but of which he appeared to have been the subject. "Your Grace?"

She was very much the great lady again, and she spoke with hauteur. "Mr. Grimes, I shall apologize to you, even if these others will not. It must be embarrassing for an outsider to be the witness to what, in effect, is a family quarrel. Yes, we are a family here on El Dorado, even though we are of diverse races and origins. But I must commend you, Mr. Grimes, for having the good sense and the courtesy not to take sides."

He tried to make a joke of his reply. "I didn't know whose side to take, Your Grace."

"Didn't you, Mr. Grimes?" sneered de Messigny.

"No," said Grimes. He allowed his indignation to take charge. "Damn it all, you people are the upper crust of the entire bloody Galaxy, or think that you are. But I tell you that such squabbling at table would not be tolerated in the Fourth Class Ratings' messroom, let alone the wardroom of a ship."

"That will do, Grimes!" snapped the Count.

"That will do, Henri!" almost snarled the Princess. "John was right in what he said."

"John?" echoed de Messigny, with a sardonic lift of his black eyebrows. "But I was forgetting, Marlene. After all, you have Karl and Fritz and Fredrik and Augustin and Johann . . . Although John has the advantage of being flesh and blood, not metal."

"De Messigny . . ." Lobenga's voice was an ominous rumble. "De Messigny, you will be silent." His strange yellow eyes swept the table. "You will all of you be silent, until I have had my say." Then he addressed the Lieutenant directly. "Mr. Grimes, what has happened should never have happened. What has been said should never have been said. But there are forces loose tonight in this old castle. Perhaps, even though there are no ghosts, the centuries of bloodstained history that these walls have seen have left a record of some kind on the very stones. There has been a clash of personalities. There has been sexual jealousy, and so the record has been played back. It was in this very hall, I am told, that Her Highness's forebear, Magda, died of her wounds.

"Be that as it may, Mr. Grimes, too much has been said in your hearing. You know too much, and too little. But I, we, feel that you have the right to know more. Do we have your word, as an officer and a gentleman, that what we shall tell you will never be divulged?"

Grimes' head was buzzing. Could it have been the effects of too much wine, or of something in the wine? And those yellow eyes staring into his were strangely hypnotic.

"Do we have your word?" asked Lobenga.

"Yes," he whispered.

"Is this wise?" asked Eulalia.

"Shut yo' mouf, woman." The deliberate lapse into the archaic dialect was frightening rather than ludicrous. This was the High Priest speaking, not the cultured Negro gentleman. "Shut yo' mouf, all of yo', until Ah is done.

"Mr. Grimes," he went on, "I can tell you that you were to have been honored, greatly honored. But circumstances now are such that,

after your stay here, you will be allowed to return to your ship."

"Honored?" asked Grimes. "How?"

"You were to have been the white goat, the goat without horns."

Grimes stared around the table in horror rather than in disbelief.

"It is true," said Marlene.

Chapter 23

"Yes," said Lobenga, breaking the heavy silence, "you are entitled to an explanation."

"You can say that again," Grimes told him.

The Hereditary Chief ignored this. "You are aware, Mr. Grimes," he went on, "of the nature of our problem on this planet."

"Yes." The spaceman was deliberately flippant. "You miss the pitterpatter of little feet and all the rest of it."

"Crudely put, sir. Crudely put, but true. Even though our lives are enormously prolonged, even though our system of safeguards almost obviates the possibility of accidental death, or death by any kind of violence, we are not immortal. And what use is great wealth if you have nobody to whom to leave it? What comfort is a bloodline stretching back to antiquity if it dies out with yourself?"

"Those," said Grimes, "are worries that I'm never likely to have."

"But you are not one of us," stated Marlene.

Lobenga continued. "All we ask, sir, is to be able to live our own kind of life on the planet of our choice. But for this one, but dreadfully important, factor we have no complaints. We are neither impotent nor frigid. Our sex lives are normal, better than normal. But are sterile, even though our finest medical practitioners assure us that there are no physical abnormalities or deficiencies."

"I was told," said Grimes, "that the women who were already pregnant when they came here were successfully brought to term and that their children lived and are now adults."

"That is correct."

"And I learned tonight that Captain de Messigny has fathered offspring on other planets."

"So he tells us," said Lobenga, adding, before the Comte could flare up, "and I have no reason to doubt his word. Furthermore, the Comte de Messigny has, on occasion, acted as procurer, bringing young men of good family to El Dorado for a vacation. Women with wealth and family lines of their own entertained them. But even though de Messigny's friends could, like himself, offer proof of their capacity for parenthood, they achieved nothing here."

"And what is the explanation?" asked Grimes. "Something in the air, or the water? Some virus or radiation?"

"According to Lord Tarlton and his colleagues, no. And we adherents to the Old Religion, in its various forms, are in agreement with the materialists."

"Then have *you* a theory?"

"We have, sir. If you will be patient I shall try to explain it to you. But, first of all, I shall ask a question. What is life?"

"I . . . I don't know. Growth? But a crystal does that. Metabolism? Motility? The ability to reproduce? We have inorganic machines that can do all these things."

"Perhaps *soul* would be the correct word," said Lobenga. "Not used in its conventional sense but, nonetheless, soul. Something indefinable, intangible that makes the difference between the organic and the inorganic, between the warm, soupy primordial seas, the lifeless fluids rich in minerals held in solution, cloudy with suspended matter, and the first viruses. And with those humble and simple beginnings the cycle was started. How did the poet put it? *Birth, procreation, death—and there's an end to it*. But as long as there's death, there's no end to it."

"And somebody or something," cackled the Duchess, "has put a spoke in the wheel of the cycle."

"Yes, Your Grace," agreed Lobenga. "*We* have. We have interrupted the natural sequence."

"But how?" asked Grimes.

"Imagine, if you can," said the Negro, "a reservoir of soul-stuff, of life-essence on every inhabited planet. Imagine, too, that *soul* has evolved, just as physical form has evolved. Visualize the act of conception—the coupling of humans, of dogs, cats, fishes, even the pollenization of a flower—and try to see that before the process of growth can commence there has to be a third factor involved, a priming of the pump, as it were. A drop has to be withdrawn from the reservoir and that reservoir is always kept topped up by the process of death."

"I begin to see."

"Good. Now this world, as you know, was utterly sterile when we purchased it, before we terraformed it, with improvements. We brought in our plant life, our animals, ourselves. Insofar as the plants and animals are concerned the normal cycle was resumed in a matter of months, at the outside. There were the inevitable deaths, the equally inevitable births. Insofar as *we* are concerned, the normal cycle has never been initiated."

"But it could have been," said Grimes. "That is, if your theory is correct."

"How, sir?"

"You, even you, have had criminals. I have seen pictures from the Monitor's memory bank. These criminals, I am informed, were arrested and sent into exile, although it was hinted that they would not live to make planet fall on another world. If, Mr. Lobenga, these

men had been executed on El Dorado, surely your pump would have been primed."

"Do you think that we have not thought of that?" asked Lobenga. "There are two valid reasons why this has never been done. To begin with, we have always taken great pains to impress upon the Monitor the sanctity of the lives of all members of the El Dorado Corporation, and have always striven to maintain the Master/Servant relationship, with ourselves, of course, as the Masters. Secondly, if you were going to top up a reservoir of any kind, would you use polluted fluids?"

"Our own souls were dipped out of dirty buckets," chuckled the Duchess of Leckhampton. "Marlene's not the only one here with a murky family past."

"But we have *evolved*," Lobenga explained patiently.

"Hah!" exploded the old lady sardonically.

"Then," said Grimes, "there is another solution."

"You are a veritable mine of information, John," the Princess told him.

"I was taught," he said, "that spacemanship is only applied commonsense. And commonsense can be applied to more things than the handling of ships. All right. We *know* that women who had conceived before coming to El Dorado bore their children here. We have reason to believe that Captain de Messigny has fathered children on other worlds. Then why, *why*, WHY shouldn't all of you who feel the urge to parenthood do your breeding off-planet?"

"Because," said Lobenga sombrely, "we have too much to lose. Because we are cowards. Because we are like the rich men mentioned, time after time in the Christian Bible, who would not give up their worldly possessions for an assured place in the Kingdom of Heaven. There is always risk involved in travelling off-planet. On El Dorado the Monitor protects us from all possible harm. On other worlds we are liable to death from disease, accident, premeditated violence. Oh, there have been couples who have taken the risk. None of them have returned. The Bernsteins both' drowned in a boating accident on Atlantia. Dom Pedro da Silva and his wife, *he* was executed on Waverley for the murder of her lover. She committed suicide. I could go on. It seems that a malign fate pursues us once we lift beyond the limits of our own atmosphere . . ." He paused. "It seems that all the risks that we avoid by living here accumulate, as it were, and once we are away from the protection of the Monitor topple, and crush us beneath their weight."

"Captain de Messigny is still with you," observed Grimes.

"Yes," said the Comte coldly. "I am still around. But before I became a member of the Corporation I led an adventurous life. And,

furthermore, I could never remain planetbound for long. *That* would kill me, Monitor or no Monitor. But even I am reluctant to leave the safety of my ship in strange ports and, furthermore, do all my entertaining on board."

"Yet another solution," put forward Grimes happily. "Build a passenger vessel, with accommodation for fifty or a hundred couples. Make a landing on a world with a well-topped-up reservoir and then breed like rabbits."

"And do you think that we haven't tried it?" the Comte asked. "The ship was half-way back to El Dorado when, inexplicably, her micro-pile went critical. I need not tell you that there were no survivors."

"So," asked Grimes, "where does the white goat come into it? Where do *I* come in?"

"We are a moral people," said Lobenga

The Duchess snorted.

"We are a moral people," he stated firmly. "It would have been relatively easy for us to have arranged an accident that would have destroyed your *Aries* and all her crew when she was coming in for a landing. But, apart from the question of morality, there would have been a full scale investigation by the Survey Service. In the same way, it would be possible to stage an accident that would wipe out one of the parties of sightseers from your ship presently touring our planet. But, once again, it would be a needless sacrifice of life and, furthermore, your Captain Daintree is no fool. Too, those of us who are practitioners of what are loosely called the Black Arts resorted to various methods or divination; even Her Grace is an expert manipulator of the Tarot pack. Each and every one of us came up with the same prognostication, the same conclusion. This was that the first offworlder to make a landing would be the bringer of new life to El Dorado. And that first offworlder was you."

"It is expedient for one man to die for the good of the people," quoted Grimes bitterly.

"Yes. And it would have been in an accident costing only one life, or, in the case of the crash-landing of your dynosoar, only two lives. There would have been no investigation."

"But why can't one of *you* prime the pump?" almost shouted Grimes. "You're always saying what a wonderful world you have here. Hasn't any one of you the guts to make a sacrifice for it? "

"Not *that* sacrifice. Mr. Grimes, I do not ask you for your sympathy, your pity, but I do ask for some measure of understanding. Only a man who has known great possessions knows how hard it is to give them up."

"And so you'd cheerfully slaughter an innocent outsider just so that you can enjoy a few more years in your sterile Eden."

"Not cheerfully, Mr. Grimes. Not cheerfully. And tell me, sir, have *you* ever slaughtered innocent outsiders?"

"No."

"Not yet, you should have said. As an officer of the armed forces of the Federation you will inevitably do so. You *will*, I said. Because, Mr. Grimes, you will live to take part in punitive expeditions, in raids upon commerce, in all the unsavory operations that are always fully justified by the historians of the winning side. We have reread the cards and the cups and the entrails, we have cast the bones. Your lifeline is a long one, but I shall not tell you the surprising turns that it will take.

"You have our word for it, Mr. Grimes. You are safe from us. Neither you nor anybody from your ship is destined to become the white goat, the goat without horns."

"You have our word," echoed the others solemnly.

He believed them. He almost said thank you, but why should he thank them for giving back to him what was not theirs to give, his life?

The Princess Marlene rose to her feet, and her guests followed suit. She said, "We are all tired, I suggest that we retire."

Robot servitors led the humans to their quarters. Grimes, entering his bedroom, saw something small and dull gleaming in the center of the coverlet of his bed. It was his Minetti automatic pistol, and beside it was the carton of spare ammunition.

And now that I shan't need it, he thought, they give it back to me.

Chapter 24

Nonetheless, he was not sorry to have the deadly little weapon back in his own possession. If there were to be any more hunting of large and dangerous animals, he would prefer to have something with which he was familiar to defend himself with. His successful use of that absurd spear against the wild boar had been nothing but luck, and he knew it.

He slept well, with the pistol under his pillow. Lobenga and the others had given their words that he was safe insofar as they were concerned, but what if they were not the only parties involved in the scheme to set the normal cycle of death and birth running on El Dorado? That gun of his own, loaded and ready to hand, gave him a sense of security that otherwise would have been lacking.

He was called in the morning in the usual manner. After he had freshened up, he found that clothing similar to that which he had worn for the boar hunt had been laid out on the remade bed. The Minetti slipped easily into the right-hand side pocket of the breeches. He practiced drawing. He would never be the Fastest Gun in the West or anywhere else, but he was sure that he would be able to defend himself adequately given only a little warning.

He enjoyed his breakfast of beautifully grilled kidneys, bacon and sausages, skimmed through the morning paper. As before, it was mainly social news and gossip. He noted that the Duchess of Leckhampton, the Comte de Messigny, the Hereditary Chief Lobenga and the Lady Eulalia were guests of the Princess Von Stolzberg, as was, still, Lieutenant John Grimes. And Captain Daintree and Surgeon Commander Passifern, together with other officers, had been present at Count Vitelli's wine tasting. Passifern, at least, would have enjoyed himself.

Karl entered silently, made a metallic cough to attract Grimes' attention. "Lord, Her Highness awaits you in the gun room."

The gun room? It took a second or so for Grimes' mind to orient itself. Aboard a ship the gun room is to cadets and midshipmen (if such are carried) what the wardroom is to commissioned officers. *The gun room?* The robot must mean that paneled chamber with its racks of assorted weaponry.

"And what's on today?" asked the spaceman through a mouthful of buttered toast dripping with honey. "Another wild boar hunt? Or are we going out for tigers or rogue elephants?"

"None of them, Lord." (Robots are apt to be humorless.) "Today you are shooting Denebian fire pheasants." There was a touch of envy

in the mechanical voice. "I am told that they are very good eating, as well as affording excellent sport."

"How so? Are they the size of corvettes, heavily armed and armoured, and vicious when aroused?"

"No, Lord. They are relatively small creatures, brilliantly plumaged, but when put up their flight is extremely fast and erratic."

"Then they should be safe enough from me."

"I was informed, Lord, that you are a gunnery specialist."

"Shooting at large targets, Karl, with a shipful of electronic aids to do all the work for me." He finished his coffee, patted his lips with the napkin (if the supercilious tin butler had not been watching, he would have wiped them) and followed the robot through the doorway.

Marlene was waiting in the gun room. With the Duchess, Lobenga and his wife, and the Comte de Messigny. Grimes noted that only the Princess was dressed for rough outdoor activities, the others were in light, comfortable attire, suitable for lounging about indoors or in the garden. They all seemed in a cheerful mood but for de Messigny whose handsome features were darkened by what was almost a scowl.

"Good morning, John," the Princess greeted him. "It's a fine day for a shoot."

"I always think that it's a pity," said the Duchess, "to destroy those beautiful birds."

"You enjoy them when they appear on the table," Marlene told her.

"Yes, my dear. Yes. And you enjoy blasting them out of the sky, so each of us has her pleasures."

"Blood sports," said the Comte, "are primitive." He permitted himself a sneer. "No doubt they are very much to the taste of a Survey Service gunnery officer, although he may find a shotgun a little small after the weapons that he is used to."

"You are a spaceman yourself, Henri," said Marlene.

"Yes. And a good one. But I'm a merchant spaceman, and before that I was a yachtsman."

"And your ship, as you have said to me, packs the armament of a light cruiser."

"Defensive, Marlene. Defensive. It is the right of any shipmaster or of any man to use any and every means available to defend his own ship, property or whatever."

"I have never liked guns," stated Lobenga, more or less changing the subject. "A hunt in which spears are used—that is to my taste."

"Not to mine," said Grimes.

He took the weapon that Marlene handed him, examined it curiously. It was a shotgun, twin-barreled, light, but with just enough

heft to it. Carefully keeping it pointed at the floor, he inspected the action, soon got the hang of it. "Two shots only," he commented, "and then you reload. Wouldn't an automatic weapon be better?"

"Yes," said the Princess, "if all you want to do is kill things. But it would take away the necessity for real skill, would destroy any element of sport."

"But I thought that the whole idea of hunting was to kill things."

"You, John," she told him, "are the sort of man who would use grenades in a trout stream."

"However did you guess?" he countered.

"Mr. Grimes," sneered de Messigny, "is obviously unacquainted with the *mystique* of huntin', shootin' and fishin'. But I have no doubt, Marlene, that under your expert tutelage he will acquire a smattering."

"No doubt," she agreed coldly. "Now, John, you have your gun. I shouldn't need to tell you about safety catches, pointing it at people and all the rest of it. Here's your bag of cartridges." Grimes took it, slung it over his shoulder. "A miniwagon will accompany us to bring in the game we shoot and will also carry our refreshments. Are you ready?"

"Yes," he said.

He followed her out of the gun room.

"Good huntin'!" called the Duchess ironically.

* * *

As before, it was a beautiful morning. They strode out over the dew-spangled grass, the sunlight warm on their faces, the grim pile of the castle behind them. To one side and a little back trundled the miniwagon, a vehicle little more than a rectangular box on balloon tired wheels. No doubt it possessed a rudimentary intelligence as well as hidden capabilities. Overhead soared the watchbirds, and ahead, trotting sedately, was a pair of beautiful dogs, red- rather than brown-coated, their plumed tails upraised and waving.

They left the relatively short grass of the fields for rougher ground, gently undulating, with outcroppings of chalky rock (but limestone, thought Grimes, could not exist on this planet), with clumps of golden-blossoming gorse, of purple-flowered heather. The warm air was full of spicy scent, and the stridulation of unseen insects was a pleasant monotone.

Suddenly the Princess stopped, broke her gun, snapped two cartridges into the breech, clicked the weapon into a state of readiness. A little clumsily, Grimes followed suit. Then Marlene gave an order in a language with which Grimes was not familiar, and both dogs yelped softly in acknowledgment. They were away then, running between the boulders and the gorse clumps, tails in a rigid line with

their bodies. They were away, something almost serpentine in their smooth, fluid motion, vanishing up the hillside.

There was an outburst of yapping, a surprisingly loud clatter of wings. Two gaudy birds rocketed up, levelled off and flew toward Grimes and the Princess. They were fast, fantastically fast, and their line of flight was unpredictable. The butt of Marlene's gun was to her shoulder and the twin barrels twitched gently as she lined up, leading the birds. There was a report, dull rather than sharp, and, a microsecond later, another one. Two bundles of ruined feathers fell to the ground. The miniwagon rolled toward them, extended a long, thin tentacle, picked up the bodies and dropped them into a receptacle at its rear.

"Nice shooting," said Grimes. He felt that it was expected of him.

"Yes," she agreed, without false modesty. "With the next pair we shall see how you can do."

Again the dogs gave voice, and again a couple of fire pheasants took to the air. Grimes was used to taking snapshots with a pistol, but never with a weapon like the one that he was holding now. But it was so well designed and balanced that it was almost part of him. He let go with his left barrel, felt the satisfaction of seeing a little explosion of scarlet and orange feathers as the shot struck home. But he was too slow with his right, and the surviving bird was darting away and clear before he could pull the trigger.

But it was coming back, flying straight toward him, steadily this time. Grimes fired, was sure that he had scored a hit, but the thing still came on steadily. Hastily, but without fumbling, he ejected and reloaded, fired again, both barrels in quick succession.

Damn it! he thought, *the brute must be armour-plated!*

Again the ejection and the reloading but before he could bring the gun up to his shoulder, the Princess put out a hand to stop him.

"What the hell are you playing at?" she blazed. "First you smash my watchbirds with your bloody dynosoar, and now you try to shoot them!"

"A . . . a watchbird?"

"What else?"

Yes, it was one of the watchbirds; now that he was no longer looking into the sun Grimes could see that. It circled them, its machinery humming, a few feet above their heads, then hovered there. From it came a voice, and some humorist had endowed the thing with a psittacoid squawk.

"Your Highness," it began.

"Yes. What is it?"

"Danger, Your Highness. The Monitor has informed me that a new

model of protective avian, still in the experimental stage, has gotten out of control and is heading this way. It is liable to kill any human being on sight."

The Princess laughed. "Yes: I have heard of this new model. A fire pheasant's brain has been incorporated and with it, perhaps, a certain resentment toward ourselves. But it will not be long before it is rounded up and destroyed."

"Hadn't we better return to the Castle?" asked Grimes.

"If you're afraid, yes."

"I am," he said frankly. "And shouldn't we ride in the miniwagon?"

"No. We can walk as fast and run, if we must, faster."

"Your Highness," screeched the watchbird. "It approaches. We go to intercept."

And then a metallic flash in the almost still air and it was gone. Marlene shrugged, whistled the dogs and then, when they came bounding up, told Grimes, "All right. We beat a retreat. But we'd better be ready to fight a rearguard action."

Chapter 25

They walked back toward the castle in silence, the miniwagon trundling along to their right, the setters to heel. Somehow, it seemed to Grimes, there was a sudden chill in the air, although the climbing sun still shone brightly, although there was only the gentlest of breezes. *And the dogs*, he thought, *feel something too*. He looked back at the two animals. They were padding along in a cowed manner, their tails drooping.

Marlene said suddenly, angrily, "This is absurd!"

"How so?" asked Grimes.

"Running from a watchbird. They are designed to protect us, not to attack us."

"But, you heard what *your* watchbird said. 'It is liable to kill any human being on sight'."

"Any offplanet human being it must have meant. Such as you." She shrugged. "Well, you are my guest, after all. I am responsible for you."

"I've managed to look after myself, so far."

"Thank you. A truly gracious guest."

"And I want to look after you," he said.

She looked full at him then. Momentarily, the harsh lines of her face softened and then she smiled. "I believe that you mean that, John. In any case, some of that incredible luck of yours might rub off on me . . ." She paused, then went on. "Yes, you are lucky. But how will it end? You recall that story I told you about our family superstition, the consequences that always ensued if something is tried, stubbornly, for a fourth time? Well, I was not quite truthful. The *third* attempt is the crucial one."

"It's that way with me and with most people."

"Is it? Anyhow, three times I tried to bring about your accidental death and failed. I'm glad I failed. But something is bound to happen to me now. With that third failure some cataclysmic sequence of events was set in motion."

"Don't be so bloody cheerful."

"This is a morbid conversation, isn't it? As for what's happening now, or what's liable to happen, I have no doubt that my own two watchbirds will be able to deal with the rogue."

Grimes wished that he could share her confidence. After all, he had been instrumental in destroying two of the things. On the other hand, there had been a certain disparity in size and weight, two relatively flimsy, miniature flying machines against a re-entry vehicle.

One of the dogs whined. Grimes stopped, looked back and down. The animals had turned, around, had stiffened in the classic pointing posture. He stared in the direction toward which they were staring, at first saw nothing. And then he could make out three distant specks in the clear sky, three dots apparently in frantic orbital motion about each other.

"Take these," said Marlene. She had got two pairs of binoculars from somewhere in the miniwagon, gave Grimes one of them. He slung his gun, lifted the high-powered glasses to his eyes. A mere touch of his finger sufficed to focus them.

It was like something from one of the History of Warfare films that the cadets had been shown at the Academy. It reminded him of an aerial dogfight-over the battlefields of Flanders in the Kaiser's War. There was the rogue, larger than its assailants, brilliantly enameled in orange and scarlet. There were Marlene's two watchbirds, metallicly glittering in the sunlight. They were diving and feinting, soaring up and away, diving again. All that was missing was the rattle of machine-gun fire. Contemptuously, the experimental model bore on, ignoring its smaller adversaries. And then one of them, coming up from below while its companion drove in from above, struck the rogue at the juncture of starboard wing with body, oversetting it. It fell out of control, almost to the ground, and then with a frantic fluttering of gaudy pinions somehow made a recovery. There was a burst of bright flame at its tail, a puff of smoke. It went up, almost vertically, like a rocket.

It was a rocket, a rocket with a brain and with the instincts of a bird of prey . . . and with the armament, miniaturized but still deadly, of a minor warship.

The two watchbirds, which had gained altitude, plunged to meet it. From the nose of the rogue came an almost invisible flicker, and the nearer of the airborne guardians burst at once into flames, exploded in blinding blue fire. The other one was hit, too, but only part of its tail was shorn away. It dived racing its burning companion to the surface, recovered and came up again. The rogue spread its wings and turned in the air to meet the attack.

The watchbird climbed slowly, slowly, unsteadily. It must have been damaged more than superficially by the slashing blade of radiation that had almost missed it. But still it climbed, and the rogue just hung there, waiting, swinging about its short axes, deliberately sighting.

There was another flicker from the vicinity of its beak, and its crippled antagonist was no more (and no less) than a bundle of coruscating, smoking wreckage drifting groundwards.

"Laser . . ." whispered Grimes. "The bloody thing's got laser!"

"We must run!" For the first time there was fear in Marlene's voice, the fear of one who has seen her impregnable defenses fall before superior, overwhelming fire power. Grimes knew how she must feel. He had felt the same way himself, as everybody has felt when faced with the failure of foolproof, *everything* proof mechanisms. "We must run!"

"Where to? That thing'll pick us off faster than you picked off the fire pheasants." He grabbed her arm before she could stumble away in panic flight. "Cover!" he shouted. "That's the answer."

"The miniwagon!" So she was thinking again.

"No." He could visualize the thing's machinery exploding as the mechanism of the watchbirds had exploded. He pulled her to one of the outcroppings of rock, about five feet high. It wasn't very good but it was better than nothing. He and the girl dropped behind it as the rogue screamed over, using its rocket drive, firing its laser gun. There was an explosion of smoke and dust and splinters from the top of the boulder.

"Quick!" cried Grimes. "Before it can turn!" He got to his feet, yanked the girl to hers, dragged her around to the other side of the outcropping. He unslung his gun. His pistol would not have been a better weapon, it didn't have the range or the spread. There was always the chance that the shotgun pellets would find some vital spot. It was a slim one, he knew, but . . .

The rogue seemed to be having trouble in turning. It came round at last, lined up for the natural fortification (such as it was). It drove in, its laser beam scoring a smoldering furrow in the turf. Unless it lifted its sights, Grimes knew that he was safe until the last moment, or he *hoped* that he was safe. He stood his ground.

Now!

A left and a right, the noise of the explosions deafening and he dropped to the ground, his ears still ringing, but he was able to hear the sharp *crack* of riven rock, felt a gust of heat.

He scrambled to his feet. This time he did not have to help the girl up. Together they ran around the clump of weatherworn boulders. Grimes half-tripped over something soft, which yelped. The dogs were still with them.

He stood there, reloading.

From the ground Marlene said, "You hit it, John."

"Yes. I hit it. Like hitting a dreadnaught with a peashooter. Keep down. Here comes the bastard again!"

It seemed to be slower this time and erratic in its flight. The wavering laser beam started a flaring, crackling fire in the gorse. But it straightened up toward the finish of its run, came in fast. Grimes let

fly with both barrels at once and dropped hastily. The Princess snatched the smouldering cap off his head.

"John! John! Are you . . .?"

"I'm all right. My brains are no more addled than usual. Come on!"

Like a game of musical chairs, he thought. *And, somebody has to be the loser . . .*

This last time it came in slowly, using wings and not reaction drive. And its laser seemed to be out of action. It came in slowly, a mechanical bird of prey, climbing, finally hanging directly above the man and the girl and the two cringing dogs, high, but not too high to be a good target.

As we, thought Grimes, *are good targets for its bombs, if it carries any.*

Standing, he could not bring his gun to bear, so lay supine, the weapon aimed directly upwards. The air in the shallow hollow was blue with acrid smoke and the turf was littered with empty shells as Grimes fired again and again and again, as the Princess matched him shot for shot. Something hot stung his cheek; it was a pellet from his own gun or from Marlene's. They must be falling all over this circumscribed area like a metallic hail.

One of the dogs cried out sharply; it must have been hit and hurt by the fall of shot. Yelping, its tail between its legs, it dashed out from the barely adequate shelter of the outcropping. Its companion followed it. Then, screaming, the rogue dived. Grimes scrambled erect somehow, kept the butt of the shotgun to his shoulder, led the thing as it plunged and let it have both barrels.

Perhaps he hit again, perhaps he did not, but it made no difference. The killer bird swooped down upon the leading dog, and its long, straight beak (rapier as well as laser gun) skewered the hapless animal just behind the ribs, hooked it up from the ground, shrieking, and then with a peculiar midair twisting motion tossed it up and away. The body, its legs still running in nothingness, fell against a rock with an audible *crunch*, and then was still.

The other setter howled dismally, kept on running, but it could never be as fast as the rogue. It almost made the protection of a clump of gorse, and then the murderous machine was on it. This time it did not use its blood-dripping beak. It banked, like an old-fashioned aircraft, and the leading edge of one stiff wing slashed the animal across the hindquarters. Howling still, it tried to drag itself along with its forelegs.

Marlene was saying something. "I must go, John. I must put him out of his misery."

He caught her arm. "No. Don't be a fool."

She shook him off. "I *must*. Cover me."

She was running out over the uneven turf, slipping and staggering. Grimes dropped his shotgun, pulled the pistol from his pocket, started after her. The rogue reached her before he did. She screamed as the deadly beak grazed her shoulder, tearing a ragged square of fabric out of her shirt; she fell to her hands and knees. But she was up again, still staggering toward her dying dog, then knocked sprawling by buffeting metal wings. Again there was the thrust of the rapier beak, and this time most of the back of her upper garment was carried away on the point of it.

I must fire, thought Grimes, *before it gets too close to her. In case it blows up*. The rattle of the Minetti set on full automatic, was startlingly loud, and the butt vibrated in the moist palm of his hand. The rogue, obligingly, was making a good target of itself (it *must* have been damaged by all the shotgun fire) slowly turning broadside on before coming in for another attack.

Grimes ejected the empty clip, put in a full one. He was firing more slowly and carefully now, in short bursts. Then, anticlimactically, the rogue fluttered, slowly to the ground. There was no explosion, only a thin trickle of blue smoke. He watched it for a second, then hurried to Marlene. She was sitting up now, only a few shreds of ruined shirt clinging to her torso. There was a trickle of blood from her right shoulder.

She waved him away, pointing. "Bruno. First you must . . . do what is necessary for him . . ."

He did it. A single shot from the Minetti sufficed. Then he walked slowly back to her, fell on his knees beside her.

"Marlene! You're hurt . . ."

"Only a scratch. But for you I . . . I could have been killed."

And when you're a near-immortal, he thought, *death can be important*. But, for the first time perhaps, he could see her point of view, could feel with her and for her. Suddenly there was a warmth between them, a warmth that, until now, had been lacking. It could be that it was shared fear that brought-them together, shared peril. It could be that, at last, there was the admission of a common humanity.

But her arms were about him and her face, grimy and tear-stained was lifted to his, and his arms were about her, and her mouth on his was soft and warm and moist, and suddenly all barriers were down, scattered like the clothing that littered the turf around them, and the sun was warm on their naked bodies, although never as warm as the heat of their own mutual generating . . .

Almost, Grimes did not hear the sharp *pllop*.

Almost he did not hear it, but he felt the metal strands writhing about his bare skin, biting into his limbs, binding himself and Marlene together in a ghastly parody, an obscene exhibition of physical love.

Into his limited range of vision, still further obscured by the tangle of the girl's blonde hair, stepped de Messigny. In his hand he held one of the bell-mouthed net-throwing pistols.

"A pretty picture!" he sneered. "A very pretty picture." In spite of the deliberate coldness of his voice, it was obvious that he was struggling to contain his fury. "As for you, Marlene, you slut! An affair with one of us I could have tolerated, but for you to give yourself to a lowbred outworlder!"

Her voice, in reply, was muffled. Grimes could feel her lips moving against his face. "I'm not property, Henri. I'm not *your* property."

"I would not want you now, you bitch."

Grimes saw that the man had pulled a knife from the sheath at his belt. He struggled to get his mouth clear, after an effort was able to mumble, "Put that thing away."

"Not yet, Mr. Grimes. Not yet."

"But this is not Marlene's fault, de Messigny."

"I have come here neither as judge nor as executioner, Mr. Grimes, although Marlene will be most appropriately punished for what *she* has done. I have come, only to sacrifice Lobenga's white goat, and the white goat is *you*."

Grimes waited for the descent of the blade. Stab or slash, what did it matter? Although a stab might be faster. And then de Messigny uttered a choking cry, seemed to be trying to contort himself so that he could strike with the blade at something behind him. Wound tightly about his neck there was a thin, metal tentacle. He was jerked out of sight.

Grimes heard the threshing sounds of the Comte's struggles slowly diminish. They finally ceased.

"The miniwagon . . ." whispered Marlene, and only a carryall but it has intelligence of sorts, and it's supposed to protect its mistress to the best of its ability. But it's slow. It was almost too slow . . ."

"It . . . it got here in time."

"Only . . . just."

She was close to him, even closer than she had been before de Messigny cast his net. Suddenly he was acutely conscious of her, all of her. And he had some freedom, not much, but a little, enough.

"Can you . . . ?" she murmured. Then, "After all, as the old saying has it, we might as well be hung for sheep as lambs . . ."

"I can . . ." he muttered.

He did.

And then, only then, did Marlene give careful orders to the dim-witted machine, telling it to pick up the pistol with its tentacle, telling it how to set the weapon so that a pulse of radiation would cause the net to loose its hold. Neither of them could see what was happening, and Grimes feared that the stupid thing would well-meaningly pick up and fire the Minetti at them.

But it did not, and each of them felt a brief tingling sensation, and then they were free. Marlene wept again over her slaughtered dogs, stared at the purple-faced, contorted body of de Messigny without expression. She resumed her clothing. Grimes resumed his.

They clambered into the miniwagon, let it carry them in silence back to the Castle.

Chapter 26

They were waiting for Grimes and Marlene in the castle courtyard—Lobenga, the Lady Eulalia, and the Duchess of Leckhampton. They were an oddly assorted trio: the Negro in his leopard skin, with a necklace of bones (animal? human?) and with a hide bag, containing who knew what disgusting relics slung at his waist; his wife robed in spotless white, with a gold circlet about her dark hair; the Duchess in gaudy finery, flounced skirt boldly striped in black and scarlet, sequined lemon-yellow blouse, a blue, polka dotted kerchief as a head covering. The clay pipe that she was smoking with obvious enjoyment should have been incongruous, but it suited her;^

Before them was a large box, a three dimensional viewing screen. To one side was the grim effigy of Baron Samedi, the wooden cross in its scarecrow clothing. It should have looked absurd in broad daylight, in these surroundings, but it did not.

Witch doctor, priestess and fortune teller... thought Grimes bewilderedly.

"What is this?" demanded Marlene. "What are you doing here?"

"We had to come outside, Princess," Lobenga told her. "There is magic soaked into the very stones of your castle, but it is the wrong sort of magic."

"Magic!" her voice was contemptuous. "That?" She gestured to the extension of the Monitor, in the screen of which the dead man, the dead dogs and the crumpled wreckage of the rogue were still visible. "Or *that*?" Her arm pointed rigidly at the clothed cross.

"Or both?" asked the Duchess quietly.

"You watched?"

"We watched," confirmed Lobenga.

"Everything?"

"Everything."

"And you did nothing to help?"

"It was all in the cards," said the Duchess.

"And you watched, everything. And you felt a vicarious thrill, just as you do at those famous masked balls of yours, Your Grace. There is nothing more despicable than a *voyeur*, especially one who spies upon her friends."

"We were obliged to watch," said Lobenga.

"By whom? By what?"

"The bones were cast," almost sang Eulalia, "the cards were read. But still there was the possibility of the unforeseen, the unforeseeable, some malign malfunction of the plan. We had to be ready to

intervene."

"There were quite a few times when you could have intervened," growled the spaceman. "When you *should* have intervened."

"No," said Lobenga. "No, Mr. Grimes. The entire operation went as planned."

"What a world!" snarled the Lieutenant. "What a bloody world! I'm sorry, Marlene, but I can't stay in this castle a second longer. I don't like your friends. Call me a taxi, or whatever you do on this planet, so that I can get back to the ship. Tell that tin butler of yours to pack my bags."

"John!"

"I mean it, Marlene."

"Let him go," said Eulalia. "He has played his part."

"As I have," whispered the princess.

"Yes."

"As Henri did."

"Yes."

She flared, "What sort of monsters are you? "

"Not monsters, Marlene," said Lobenga gently. "Just servants of a higher power."

"Of the Monitor?" she sneered. "Or of Baron Samedi?"

"Or both?" asked Eulalia.

"Things went a little too far," said the Duchess.

"You mean Henri's death?" queried Marlene. "But somebody had to die."

"I do not mean Henri's death. I mean what happened afterwards. But it does not matter. After all, the English aristocracy has always welcomed an occasional infusion of fresh blood. And, my dear, in a way the child, if there is one, will be Henri's."

"That," said Marlene, her voice expressionless, "is a comforting thought."

"I'm glad that you see it that way." The Duchess sucked on her pipe, blew out a cloud of smoke that was acrid rather than fragrant. "You know, my dear, the cards were really uncanny. The Hanged Man kept turning up." For Grimes' benefit she explained, "That is one of the cards of ill-omen in the Tarot pack." She went on, "Of course, we were expecting a death, a violent death, but not in so literal a manner."

"Must we go into all this, Honoria?" asked Marlene.

"If you would rather not, my dear, we will not. But. . ."

"*But what?*"

"Poor Henri was addicted to the use of archaic slang but, oddly enough, only when he was talking to me. Just before he went out to

play Vulcan to your Venus and Mars he said that he was going to fix your wagon." She deliberately took her time refilling and relighting her short pipe. "But your wagon fixed him."

"Let us leave these ghouls," said Marlene disgustedly. Grimes fell rather than jumped out of the miniwagon, then helped the girl to the ground. Together they walked into the castle.

* * *

"Yes, John," said Marlene. "It is better that return to your ship. You have played your part, more than your part."

Grimes looked at the girl's grave face. There was nothing in it for him any more. He looked past her to the shining weapons incongruously displayed on the wall of her boudoir. He thought, *I know more about guns than women.*

He said, "I'm sorry it happened."

"Don't be a liar, John. You wanted me from the very first moment that you saw me, and you finally got me."

"Are you sorry it happened?"

For the first time since their return to the castle, she showed signs of emotion.

"That is a hard question to answer, John. But, no, I am not sorry that it happened. I am not even sorry that it happened the way that it did. What I am sorry about is the humiliation. And, of course, Henri's death." Her features suddenly contorted into a vicious mask. "But he deserved it!"

"And somebody, as everybody here has been telling me, had to die."

"And better, I suppose, one of us than one of you. It keeps it all in the family, doesn't it? Very neat, very tidy." There were the beginnings of hysteria in her voice.

"Marlene!"

"No. *Don't touch me!*"

"All right. But I thought . . ."

"Don't think. It's dangerous."

"Marlene, what about the child, if there is one?"

"What about it?"

"Well . . . it could be . . . embarrassing. Will you marry me?"

She laughed then but it was not hysterical laughter. It was not altogether contemptuous. "Oh, John, John . . . The perfect petty bourgeois to the very last. Offering to make an honest woman of me, *me*, and on a world which can boast the finest medical brains in the Galaxy. Not that our physicians have had much practice in terminating pregnancies. Marry *you*, John, a penniless Survey Service Lieutenant? Oh; I appreciate it, appreciate the offer, but it just

wouldn't work out. You aren't our sort of people and we aren't yours. I'd sooner have married Henri, and he asked me often enough, with all his faults."

"We could marry," he pressed doggedly, "and then divorce."

"No. This is El Dorado, not some lower middle-class slum of a planet. And furthermore, John, I shall be a heroine. I shall go down in history. The first woman to conceive on this world."

"You don't know that you have."

"But I do. I . . . *I felt it.*"

He got slowly to his feet. "I'll see if Karl has packed my bags."

She said, "You don't have to go."

He asked, "Do you want me to?"

Her expression softened almost imperceptibly. "What if I told you that Lobenga, Eulalia and the Duchess have already left the castle? They have done what they had to do."

"And have they? Left, I mean."

"Yes."

He felt the weakening of his resolution. Those other guests had witnessed what had happened between Marlene and himself but, as servants of the Monitor, there was much that they must have witnessed. Now that he would no longer be obliged to meet them socially . . .

"You will stay?" she asked.

"Why?" he queried bluntly.

"Because . . ."

"Because what?"

"Because I want to be sure."

"You told me that you were."

She quoted, "Only two things in life are certain, death and taxes. Death, John, not Birth. But, together, we can bring some degree of certainty to the fact of conception."

He said, "You are a cold-blooded bitch."

"But I'm not, John, I'm not." She was on her feet her body gleaming golden through the translucent green wrap that she had changed into, her slender arms slightly away from her sides. He took a step toward her, and another, until she was pressed against him. Her hands went up, clasped at the back of his neck, pulled his mouth down to hers.

There was a discreet, metallic cough.

The princess pulled away from Grimes, asked coldly, "Yes, Karl?"

"I must apologize, Your Highness. But a call has come through by way of the Monitor for all personnel of the cruiser *Aries*. It seems that

the ship is urgently required to help quell an insurrection on Merganta, which world, as you know, is only two light years from El Dorado. Lieutenant Grimes' bags are already in the air car."

She said, "You have to go."

He said, "Yes."

"Good bye."

"I'll be back."

"Will you?" she asked, her face suddenly hard, "Will you?" Her laugh was brittle. "Yes, John, come back when you have your first billion credits."

He could think of nothing more to say, turned abruptly on his heel and followed the robot to the waiting air car.

Chapter 27

There was the insurrection on Merganta, a bloody affair, in the suppression of which *Aries* did all that was demanded of her, but no more. Many of her officers and most of her crew felt more than a little sympathy for the rebels. It was Grimes, in command of one of the cruiser's armed pinnaces, who intervened to stop the mass executions of three hundred women, wives of leading insurgents, turning his weapons on the government machine gunners. For this he was reprimanded, officially, by Captain Daintree, who, later, in a stormy interview with the planetary president, used such phrases as "an overly zealous officer" and "mistaken identity," adding coldly that Lieutenant Grimes naturally assumed that it was not the forces of law and order who were about to commit cold-blooded murder.

There was the mutiny aboard the Dog Star Line's freighter *Corgi* and the long chase, almost clear out to the Rim, before the merchantman was overhauled and boarded. The mutineers did not put up a fight, for which Grimes, in charge of the boarding party, was profoundly thankful. He had seen enough of killing.

There was the earthquake that destroyed Ballantrae, the capital of Ayr, one of the planets of the Empire of Waverley. *Aries*, the only major vessel in the vicinity, hastened to the stricken city, performed nobly in the rescue work and then, from her generators supplied power for essential services until the work of reconstruction was well under way.

All in all, it was an eventful voyage, and a long one, with the movements of the ship unpredictable. The married men, those who were pining for letters from home, were far from sorry when, at last, *Aries* was recalled to Lindisfarne Base.

* * *

Almost all the officers were in the wardroom when the mail came on board. They waited impatiently. Finally Hodge, the Paymaster Lieutenant, came in, followed by a rating carrying a large hamper of packages. "Gentlemen," he announced. "Cupid's messenger, in person. Sweethearts and wives, all in the same basket. What am I bid?"

"Cut the cackle, Hodge!" snarled Lieutenant Commander Cooper. "Deal 'em out, although mine'll be only bills and please explains as usual."

"As you say, sir, Lieutenant Commander, sir. Roll up, roll up, for the lucky dip!"

"Get on with it, Hodge!" snapped the Navigator. He was not the only one becoming impatient. Luckily the mail had already been

sorted, so there was little delay in its distribution. Most of the officers, as soon as they had received their share, retired to the privacy of their own cabins to read it.

Grimes looked at his, recognizing handwriting, typescript styles, postage stamps. A letter from faraway . . . From Jane? Nice of her to write after all these years. One from Caribbea. That would be from Susanna. And a parcel, a little, cubical parcel. The address typed, with oddly Gothic lettering. And the stamp in the likeness of a gold coin, and it probably was embossed gold leaf at that . . .

Surgeon Commander Passifern was demanding attention. "This is interesting," he declaimed. "This is *really* interesting. You remember how we were called in to El Dorado so that I could help their top doctor, Lord Tarlton of Dunwich, with his problem. I worked with him and his people—they've some brilliant men there, too—quite closely. 'Diet,' I said to him. 'Diet, Tarlton, that's the answer. Cut out fancy, mucked-up food of yours, get back to the simple life. Don't over-eat. Don't drink.' "

"Physician, heal thyself . . ." muttered Cooper.

Passifern ignored this, "And it worked. This—" he waved the sheet of expensive looking paper—"is a letter from Lord Tarlton. In it he thanks me—well, *us*, actually, but he's just being polite to the ship—for our help. Since we left there have been no fewer than four hundred and twenty-five births."

"Did he . . ." began Grimes, "did he say who the mothers were?"

"Hardly, young Grimes. Not in a short note."

"At least," put in Cooper, "we know that none of us were the fathers."

Grimes left the wardroom then. He found himself resenting the turn that the conversation had taken. He went to his cabin, shut the door behind him, then sat down on his bunk. He found the little tab on the seal of the parcel, pulled it sharply. The wrapping fell away.

Inside it was a solidograph. From its depths smiled a blonde woman, Marlene, a more mature Marlene, a matronly Marlene, looking down at the infant in her arms.

Grimes had been amused more than once by the gushing female friends of young mothers with their fatuous remarks: "Oh, he's got his mother's eyes," or "He's got his Uncle Fred's nose," or "He's got his Auntie Kate's mouth . . ."

But there was, he admitted now, something in it. This child, indubitably, had his father's ears.

Suddenly he felt very sorry that he would never make that billion credits.

THE END

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To Prime the Pump

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